

Moralising to Impress

*Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke explain
the ways of grandstanders*

What is the point of public discussion about moral issues? Most people would probably say it's to spur moral improvement, highlight important causes, or change people's minds. We doubt many would list among their favoured explanations that public moral discourse should promote the status or reputation of its contributors. It's hard to imagine someone admitting that they use their protestations about injustice or lack of patriotism to impress other people. But if you take a close look at these discussions, it's hard to escape the conclusion that that's exactly what many people are hoping to achieve by weighing in.

Activist and author Layla Saad recently told Jezebel Magazine, "A good ally isn't focused on whether they're looking like a good ally. They're focused on showing up in allyship to people of color, and not wondering about 'Am I going to be seen? Am I going to be rewarded?'"

Some people, however, are focused on being seen and rewarded for taking the public stances that they do. When people contribute to moral discussions with that goal, they are engaging in moral grandstanding.

There is a lot of confusion about what it means to grandstand – or, similarly, to engage in virtue signalling. We find it helpful to think of grandstanding as having two parts. First, someone says or writes something in public, like on Twitter or a cable

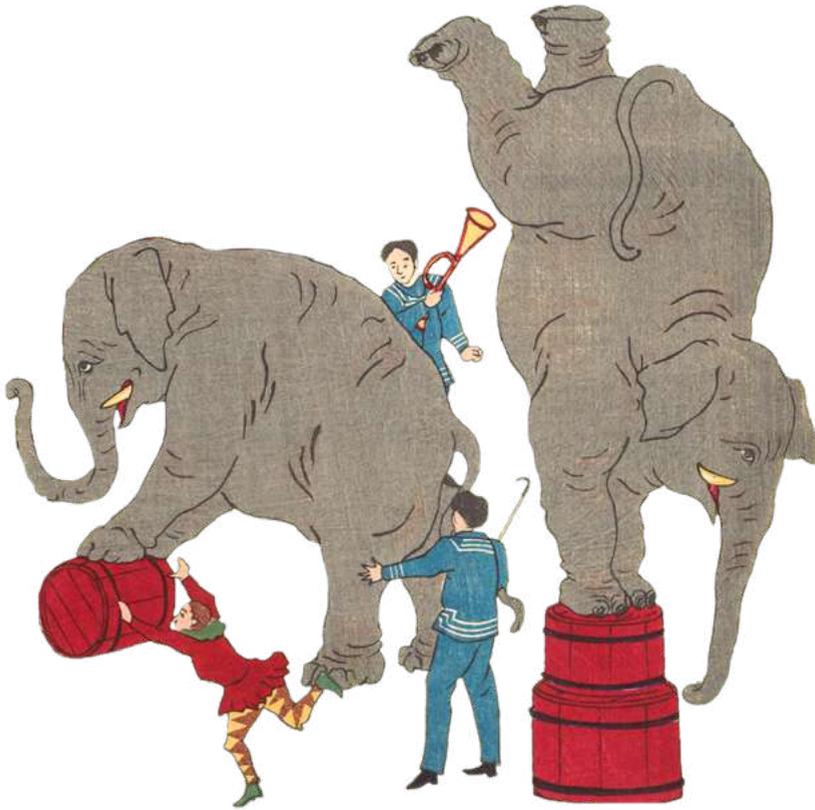
news show. They could say something like "policing is inherently unjust, and should be abolished. This is just obvious to anyone who cares." Or, "I absolutely will not tolerate these people criticising the president. They're committing treason, and they should be punished."

Grandstanders can speak the truth

Many people want to stop here, and say that grandstanding is just publicly saying anything that invokes morality – especially something they don't like. But that's a mistake. This is because grandstanding has another essential feature, one that is hard to detect. Grandstanding isn't just talking about morality or politics. It's doing these things largely because we want to impress other people. As Saad puts it, they're focused on how they're being seen and how they'll be socially rewarded.

Putting these parts together, grandstanding is saying something in public moral discourse because you want your audience to recognise you for being morally good. Put more succinctly, grandstanding is the use of moral talk for self-promotion.

Even though our desire to stand out and look impressive can often push us to adopt



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more extreme stances, grandstanders can speak the truth. So we should all be able to recognise that even people who agree with us are sometimes guilty of grandstanding. We should even be able to admit that we sometimes grandstand ourselves. It's also important to see that, in our view, grandstanders can mean what they say. They don't have to be engaged in hypocritical cheap talk to be grandstanding, though this is surely often the case. Layla Saad's concern is not that grandstanders are saying false things, or even that they're hypocrites. Rather she takes aim at those who enter

moral and political debates to look good. She's right to do so.

Grandstanding is a serious moral problem, one that has no doubt been exacerbated by the role social media has come to play in our lives. A hundred years ago, grandstanders had to go far out of their way to find an audience to impress with their moral pronouncements. You had to be a politician, a preacher, a journalist, or otherwise just stand on the street corner and yell. But now each of us has access to hundreds of thousands of people at arms' length, ready to sig-



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nal agreement with our moral and political views. For this reason, many feel tempted or even pressured to engage in grandstanding, especially online.

In our book, *Grandstanding: The Use and Abuse of Moral Talk*, we give several arguments for why grandstanding is bad and should be avoided. Here, we'll just show you some of the things people do when they grandstand, leaving it as an exercise to the reader to consider the moral implications of a marked increase in these behaviours where grandstanding is prevalent.

Grandstanding is the use of moral talk for self-promotion

One common tactic of grandstanders is to join in on what others are saying or doing because they want to be seen as having the “right” values or being a member in good standing on their political team. This piling on can take two forms. Sometimes grandstanders just want to be seen as holding certain moral or political views, and to be affirmed and praised for doing so by their in-group. A grandstander might pile on in this way by joining hundreds of their friends in replying to a social media post about how some speaker should absolutely not be allowed on campus: “YES. This is everything. I just want to add my voice to this brave chorus and let it be known that I do NOT approve of this. We must remember the university community is watching!”

Grandstanders behave this way in part due to the Black Sheep Effect: members of a

group who are perceived to be uncommitted or inconsistent in their commitment to the group's values are harshly judged. Aware of this, some people go out of their way to chime in to a discussion for no other reason than to be seen a certain way, and to be rewarded for saying things their group supports.

Piling on can also involve darker behaviour in the form of online shame-fests, in which hundreds or thousands of people heap abuse on someone for an alleged moral mistake. Often these “transgressions” are blown out of proportion (we'll talk more about this in a bit). Grandstanders line up to call names, feel powerful, and assert their dominance all in the comfort of their supposed moral superiority. As nasty as this behaviour often is, what's perhaps more worrying is that a lot of this social sanctioning is done by people who don't even agree with the moral rules they're enforcing. Evidence suggests that people engage in such “false enforcement” of norms in order to look above suspicion of not being committed enough to their group's views. By going out of their way to punish people, they show they're true believers, even if they secretly harbour doubts about whether some poor soul did something wrong – or if they did, whether they deserve the aggregate social punishment from thousands of strangers online.

A second thing grandstanders do in public discourse is ramp up. You may have noticed conversations following this kind of script between three people:

I'm really shocked and disappointed that Taylor Swift chose to film her music video in Texas, given its history of human rights abuses. I'm not sure I can continue to support her.

Here, let me help you out. What she did is absolutely unforgivable and I can't believe you're sitting on the fence on this one. Maybe you aren't really committed to doing the hard work of justice if you're uncertain about this.

Seriously? She's basically complicit in genocide. She needs to be dropped from Spotify immediately. Do better.

In their search for social status, conversations among grandstanders often resemble a moral arms race, as participants vie for the position of caring most about some value, or being most outraged about some event (more on this soon, too). This happens because of a psychological phenomenon called social comparison. We tend to think of ourselves in terms of how we measure up against others. So if you think of yourself as caring deeply about some value, yet someone else says something that makes *them* look like they care more than you do, you have two options. You can let that person look better than you, or you can intervene and outdo them. Grandstanders take the latter option, which is why so many of our discussions about politics quickly take us to extremes.

Another tool of the grandstander's trade is trumping up. Just like prosecutors can trump up legal charges against the innocent, grandstanders trump up moral charges when they use others' morally innocent behaviour (or a minor moral misstep) as an occasion to display their heightened moral awareness or exacting moral standards. The wrongs that fall below the radar of the *boi polloi* are not missed by the vigilant eye of the grandstander. By publicly deploying

her heavy moral artillery – strident moral condemnation, and incitement of others to do the same – the grandstander presents herself as a person of high moral character, committed to righting the wrongs of the world no matter how inconsequential they may seem to the rest of us. Hence the outcry when President Obama wore a tan suit to a press conference or saluted a Marine holding a coffee cup. It takes a deep commitment to decorum to get incensed about those sorts of things.

Grandstanding is a serious moral problem

In Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *The Princess and the Pea*, a would-be princess's royal credentials are certified when, upon sleeping upon 20 beds and 20 mattresses, she's badly bruised by a pea hidden under the bottom of the stack. Andersen uses the story to poke fun at the pretensions of royalty – for only a person suited for royalty could be so sensitive! Grandstanding in the form of trumping up has the same logic, which is why so much grandstanding involves moralising about the minutiae of others' behaviour.

Grandstanders also commonly engage in displays of strong emotions. They are quick to express moral outrage, report that they are devastated by the news of the day, or share the degree of their ecstasy at outcomes that please their in-group. There is nothing necessarily wrong with feeling things deeply, or letting others see that you're doing so. On the contrary, it's part of being human,



and at least sometimes socially valuable for people to share their emotional reactions. But grandstanders frequently overuse their emotional outlets. Once we consider some of the social functions of emotions, it won't be surprising that grandstanders exploit them in this way.

Psychological research and common sense both suggest that our emotions are often tied up with our most firmly held moral beliefs. When we see behaviour that runs afoul of our deep moral convictions, we tend to get upset or outraged. Grandstanders are aware of this, and they take full advantage of emotional displays to show others how strong their moral convictions are. By becoming outraged so often, they encourage others to see them as especially

morally sensitive or serious.

There is also research in psychology that suggests we use our emotions to feel self-righteous. In one study, participants were more likely to keep reading stories about injustice when the stories made them feel righteous anger, rather than switch to a morally neutral story. This suggests that people enjoy opportunities to reinforce their images of themselves as morally good. It makes sense that we would also welcome opportunities to present those images to others, by sharing our outrage about injustice. Grandstanders do just that.

Finally, grandstanders are often dismissive of those who disagree with them about moral issues. We can all agree that it is sometimes entirely fair to refuse to

engage with people who are so hostile or so thoroughly corrupt that they cannot be reasoned with. But dismissal of others and their views can also be exploited to suggest flattering things about yourself.

Perhaps the grandstander is so advanced in her moral thinking that she wouldn't even know where to begin in discussion with someone so blighted as the fool who disagrees with her. Or maybe the moral truth is so obvious to her that it is beneath her to explain herself to someone who refuses to see the light.

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It might be thought that such refusal to engage is a sign of moral vice – impatience in doing the hard work of talking through your reasons with others. But it could also be interpreted as a sign of purity. The moral elite does not waste its time getting its hands dirty or giving evil the time of day. Grandstanders often refuse to “platform” views they regard, publicly least, to be so harmful, that they could do great damage by discussing them. By refusing even to engage, the grandstanding protects us from that harm, an act of virtue for which we owe the grandstander our appreciation and praise. If someone goes about her business in public moral discourse while displaying this attitude, then perhaps she is not a lazy ideologue, but a true saint. Some grandstanders find this strategy irresistible.

Upon learning how people use public

discourse to self-promote and gain social status, there are two ways one might respond. One is to go into the wild of social media and try to identify grandstanders, perhaps even calling them out for it. This is the wrong response. Our lack of access to peoples' motivations makes it hard to tell if someone is grandstanding. And furthermore, even if it looks like someone is, say, expressing outrage in an effort to impress others, not every instance of outrage is grandstanding.

Instead, seeing what people do when they grandstand helps us monitor our own contributions to discourse. Are we feeling morally superior and trying to dominate others? Or expressing outrage to get others to notice us? Improving our conversations starts from the bottom up, as individuals pause and reflect on why we get involved at all. Layla Saad's question is the right one. Am I doing this to be seen and rewarded? Or do I have something more valuable to add to the already crowded public square than the promotion of my own image?

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