

Reflections on intellectual grandstanding.

Jack Warman

Universidad Alberto Hurtado

This article is forthcoming in *Southwest Philosophy Review*. Please cite the published version.

§1 Introduction.

In this short paper, I present a philosophical account of intellectual grandstanding. In section 2, I identify a putative case of intellectual grandstanding. In section 3, I introduce Tosi and Warmke's account of moral grandstanding (Tosi & Warmke 2016, 2020). In section 4, I highlight some of the similarities and differences between intellectual and moral grandstanding. In section 5, I conclude by proposing some further lines of inquiry.

§2 A case of intellectual grandstanding.

Writing in *Spectrum*, the official magazine of the Australian Society of Medical Imaging and Radiation Therapy, Murphy and Steffens express their concerns about the rise of intellectual grandstanding at scientific meetings. They describe a scene from the 12th Annual Scientific Meeting of Medical Imaging and Radiation Therapy in Perth, Australia. 'Multiple times in Perth', they write,

there were occasions where individuals significantly more qualified and experienced than the speaker would stand up in question time, not to ask a question, but to criticise the speaker directly (often repeatedly) ensuring it was well known to all present that the speaker's intellectual rigour was dwarfed compared to their own [...] On some occasions, presenters (including first-timers) were subjected to withering barrages of criticism such that their confidence was shattered; rendering an experience that should have been affirming and satisfying into one that left them questioning their place in the profession. (Murphy & Steffens, 2017, pp. 14-15)

The phenomenon described by Murphy and Steffens may be familiar to many readers. Indeed, the vocabulary we use to describe these types of experiences suggests that they are not only quite common, but also that they are accepted as part and parcel of the academic experience: we might complain about 'taking a grilling' in a Q&A session or we might describe the experience of presenting at one's first conference as receiving a 'baptism of fire'. Despite the unpleasantness of these experiences, I suspect that some accept that these are 'rites of passage'. Admittedly, we cannot draw strong conclusions from anecdotes like this. Nevertheless, it seems as if intellectual grandstanding were a widespread phenomenon.

§3 What is grandstanding?

The starting point of this paper is Tosi and Warmke's account of moral grandstanding (2016, 2020).¹ According to Tosi and Warmke (2016, 2020), moral grandstanding is an abuse of moral talk. Moral talk here includes discussions of moral concepts such as 'rights, dignity, respect, and respect' (2020, p. 3). So do conversations about the moral quality of someone's conduct or character, arguments about their just deserts, professions of moral sentiments, and talk about the moral value of social policy (2020, p. 4). Moral talk like this can be valuable, but it can be also abused, for instance, when people use it to bully others or to justify one's own misconduct (2020, 5).

Tosi and Warmke (2020, pp. 9-10) offer the following putative example of moral grandstanding. These are the words of Roy Moore, a Republican who stood for the US senate in a special election in 2017, after a court ordered him to remove a giant granite tablet, inscribed with the Ten Commandments, from the Alabama Supreme Court:

It's not a question of whether I will disobey or obey a court order. The real question is whether or not I will deny the God that created us and endowed us with certain inalienable rights that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. (Quoted in Tosi & Warmke, 2020, p. 8)

Reading these words, we might speculate about their speaker's intentions. One might interpret them as a profession of Christian moral integrity. But on Tosi and Warmke's reading, these words may be better interpreted as an attempt to bolster their audience's appreciation of their speaker's moral respectability, or in other words, as an instance of moral grandstanding.²

Grandstanding, on Tosi and Warmke's view, has two key components: the *recognition desire* and the *grandstanding expression* (2016, pp. 201-203).³ The recognition desire is the desire to be recognised as morally respectable (Tosi & Warmke, 2020; 2016). Sometimes, the recognition desire is broad, namely, when the grandstander seeks general recognition that they are, to borrow Tosi and Warmke's words, 'on the side of the angels' (2016, p. 201; see also 2020, p. 16). Other times, the recognition desire is narrower: they seek to be admired for having specific moral virtues or sensibilities, or as possessing a particularly ingenious solution to a specific moral problem (2020, p. 16).

¹ It is important to acknowledge that Tosi and Warmke themselves think that grandstanding occurs outside the moral domain. In particular, they mention that one could grandstand about one's 'intellect, achievements, and know-how' (2016, fn. 2).

² One could argue about whether this is really a case of moral grandstanding. Nothing much rides on the outcome of that argument. If this is not, after all, a case of moral grandstanding but in fact a genuine profession of moral conviction, then it serves as a good illustration of the fact that often it is hard to tell whether someone is grandstanding or speaking sincerely.

³ Note that these are not supposed to be necessary or sufficient conditions for grandstanding; rather, they are proposed as key characteristics of moral grandstanding.

According to Tosi and Warmke's view, this seemingly heterogeneous set of desires is unified by the desire for social elevation. Grandstanding can establish prestige or dominance by enabling the grandstander to present themselves as a moral exemplar. It can establish the grandstander's dominance by using moral talk to shame, silence, or humiliate others. But whatever approach the grandstander takes, their purpose is to elevate their social position (2020, p. 16-18).

Grandstanding also involves a grandstanding expression, which always takes the form of speech (Tosi & Warmke, 2020, p. 19). Tosi and Warmke identify several grandstanding strategies, namely (a) piling on, (b) ramping up, (c) trumping up, (d) strong emotions and (e) dismissiveness (2020). I will describe these briefly below.

Grandstanders engage in 'piling on' (Brandon & Warmke 2020, pp. 44-50; see also 2016, pp. 203-204). Once grandstanders get wind of the mood of the group, they reiterate their agreement with the most popular views and arguments. This allows the moral grandstander to exploit the social dynamics of groups, and in particular, the phenomenon of *social comparison*, whereby people tend to want to be favourably perceived by others, Tosi and Warmke suggest (2016, p. 204). Ramping up is another key strategy of grandstanding. A moral grandstander engages in 'ramping up' by making increasingly strong moral claims, leading to what Tosi and Warmke call 'a moral arms race' (2020, p. 51; see also 2016, pp. 205-206). Trumping up is another strategy that is typically employed in grandstanding. The moral grandstander 'trumps up' where they insist 'on the existence of moral problems where there is none' (2016, p. 206; see also 2020, pp. 54-57). Sometimes, for instance, moral grandstanders like to show how morally sensitive they are by 'objecting to features of the world that we moral peasants regard as insignificant, innocent, or even laudable' (2020, p. 55).

Moral grandstanders also exploit the power of emotion (2020, pp. 57-62). In particular, public displays of moral outrage allow us to share with others where our moral convictions really lie (2020, p. 58). Grandstanders can give the impression that they are more sensitive to moral matters by exploiting the 'implicit assumption' that 'the most outraged person has the greatest moral insight or the strongest moral conviction about the issue under discussion' (2020, p. 60).

Finally, moral grandstanders can be dismissive (Tosi & Warmke, 2020, pp. 62-64). Sometimes this dismissiveness takes the form of claims of self-evidence (Tosi & Warmke, 2020, pp. 62-63). By stating their moral views as if they were unquestionably correct, grandstanders make disagreement socially difficult and present themselves as possessing superior information or judgement. Grandstanders also tend to appeal to their authority, heralding their moral pronouncements with phrases such as, 'As a patriotic American ...' (Tosi & Warmke, 2020, p. 63).

Two things are worth mentioning at this point. First, grandstanding typically involves the use of indirect language to elicit recognition in the audience, according to Tosi and Warmke (2020, pp. 20-21). This affords the grandstander a degree of plausible deniability. It allows the grandstander's audience to use their imaginations to fit the grandstander into their preconceptions of moral respectability. Second, the fact that someone grandstands tell us neither whether they actually have the qualities or status that they desire others to see in them, nor whether they believe

that they have these qualities or that status (Tosi & Warmke, 2020, pp. 23-26). Grandstanding may thus be related to Frankfurt's notion of bullshit (2005), since grandstanders may be bullshitting when they attempt to inflate other people's perceptions of the relevant aspects of their character.

To summarise: the key characteristics of grandstanding are the recognition desire and the grandstanding expression. In the following section of this paper, I explain how intellectual grandstanding fits into this picture of grandstanding.

§4 From moral grandstanding to intellectual grandstanding.

If moral grandstanding is an abuse of moral talk, then intellectual grandstanding is an abuse of intellectual talk. In this context, the term 'intellectual talk' should be interpreted broadly. For instance, discussions of topics such as politics, philosophy, economics, the arts, the natural sciences, and medicine all count as intellectual talk. So do conversations which invoke the concepts of rationality, such as evidence, logic, arguments, fallacies, scepticism, and so on.

The recognition desire in intellectual grandstanding. Where the moral grandstander desires to be recognised as *morally* respectable, the intellectual grandstander desires to be recognised as *intellectually* respectable. As in moral grandstanding, the desire behind intellectual grandstanding can be broad or narrow. Either way, at the core of such desires is the desire for social elevation. There are layers of nuance here that are worth picking apart.

Consider the case of the conference bully. A plausible interpretation of the motives of the conference bully is that they seek to elevate their social position within a relatively small community (i.e., the conference). Likewise, their desire for recognition is focused on a narrow set of intellectual characteristics that are associated with their professional role as a scientist. Their recognition desire is thus narrow in two senses: first, with respect to the target audience, and second, with respect to the intended belief. Now let us consider a posturing politician, who may desire recognition for a fairly broad set of intellectual characteristics. The recognition desire in the case of the posturing politician is thus broad in two senses: first, with respect to the target audience, and second, with respect to the intended belief.

Either way, those who engage in intellectual grandstanding seek social elevation *via* recognition for their intellectual respectability. In this way, intellectual grandstanding and moral grandstanding are very much alike.

Grandstanding expressions and intellectual grandstanding. Intellectual grandstanding involves many of the same grandstanding expressions that can be found in moral grandstanding. There are also some interesting differences between the typical grandstanding expressions of each variety of grandstanding. In the sections that follow, I explain these similarities and differences.

Piling on, ramping up, and trumping up in intellectual grandstanding. Piling on occurs in intellectual grandstanding when the grandstander repeats arguments and insights that have already been received social approval in a discourse. We can imagine how the conference bully repeats the questions made by other audience members, as a way of both expressing their frustration with the presenter's earlier responses and also their agreement with the audience. This

allows them to establish dominance over the presenter and prestige within the audience. The conference bully might also make a point of making sure that their criticism of the speaker appeals to the kinds of arguments that they know their audience will agree with. They might privately have other, more controversial reasons for disagreeing with the speaker, but they will not risk drawing attention to the possibility that they, the conference bully, are mistaken. Indeed, we might speculate that grandstanders can use this strategy to ‘divide and conquer’, that is, by first excluding the presenter from the group, and then bolstering their own reputation within the group by shaming or humiliating the newly excluded presenter.

Ramping up also occurs in intellectual grandstanding. One example of ramping up is the insistence on the requirement of criminal standards of evidence, which is to say, belief beyond a reasonable doubt, in non-criminal, and indeed, non-legal contexts. These standards are often invoked in discussions of whether and how institutions should respond to sexual assault testimony (see Crewe & Ichikawa, forthcoming). It is argued that institutions should not respond to sexual assault testimony in the absence of overwhelming evidence in favour of the allegation.

Intellectual grandstanding can involve trumping up too. In intellectual grandstanding, the grandstander engages in trumping up when they insist on the existence of an intellectual problem where this is none. One way of trumping up is to appeal inappropriately to sceptical concerns, perhaps by questioning the reliability of ordinary perception or, more sophisticatedly, raising doubts about human rationality given the prevalence of implicit bias. Relatedly, some of what Haack identifies as ‘signs of scientism’ may be considered forms of ramping up. For instance, Haack notes that scientism is often characterised by ‘a preoccupation with demarcation, that is, with drawing a sharp line between genuine science, the real thing, and “pseudo-scientific” imposters’ (2010, 4). Someone who insists that their judgements are based upon science and scientific method and not pseudoscience may well be grandstanding.

Emotion and intellectual grandstanding. Tosi and Warmke identify ‘excessive emotional displays or reports’ as a mechanism of moral grandstanding (2016, pp. 206-208). In intellectual grandstanding, stereotypes and prejudices about emotion and its relation to rationality are exploited in a variety of ways too, some of them unexpected.

By projecting an image of themselves as unemotional, rational thinkers, intellectual grandstanders are able to exploit stereotypes about emotion and rationality to present themselves as intellectually respectable. Where the external signs of emotional detachment are indicators of intellectual respectability, grandstanders may be able to gain prestige among their target audience. Consider the stereotype that emotion and emotional sensitivity conflict with intellectual respectability. This is an enduring stereotype. Sherlock Holmes is perhaps *the* iconic representation of intellectual respectability in Western popular culture. Watson describes Holmes’ attitude towards love in *A Scandal in Bohemia* thus: ‘All emotions, and that one in particular, were abhorrent to his cold, precise, but admirably balanced mind’ (1892/2002, p. 3). The implication is that intellectual prowess can be attained only by the exclusion of emotion from reason’s domain.

Moreover, it seems that this sentiment has endured in the stereotype that emotional sensitivity and rationality are in tension with one another, and that displays of emotion are signs

of irrationality.⁴ It is not only *displays* of emotion that are considered signs of irrationality. Giving evidential weight or deliberative consideration to people's emotions may also be treated as a sign that someone is not intellectually respectable.

Interestingly, not all displays of emotion are excluded from the stereotype of intellectual respectability. Sometimes intellectual grandstanders make exaggerated emotional displays, for instance, to emphasise their outrage at someone else's intellectual shortcomings. Let us turn again to our conference bully. They might express their outrage at alleged shortcomings in the presenter's research. These emotional displays may be flaunted, in the sense that while they reflect outrage that the conference bully really feels, they are designed to be noticed by the presenter and the rest of the audience. They may also be faked, that is, they are an affectation of outrage that he does not really feel, or that he uses to assuage his guilt (see Tosi & Warmke, 2016, pp. 57-62). Whether a grandstander's emotional displays are flaunted or faked, their point is the same: to gain recognition that they are intellectually respectable.

This mechanism of intellectual grandstanding is quite surprising, given the prevalence of the stereotype that emotion is incompatible with rational thought. There are a couple of ways it might work. It is plausible, I suggest, that this mechanism actually trades off this stereotype. When the conference bully explodes in fury at the supposed shortcomings of the early career researcher's presentation, they present themselves as having been pushed too far. Thus, in the intellectual variety of grandstanding, the grandstander cannot be quick to anger. Rather, they must present an image of themselves as someone who is usually able to keep their emotions in check but who has been pushed too far *this time*. In the case of the conference bully, this conveys the message that the presentation was *exceptionally* bad.

In summary, intellectual and moral grandstanding have much in common. They involve the use of surprisingly types of grandstanding expressions in pursuit of satisfaction of the grandstander's desire for recognition as deserving of respect, be it as a moral agent or an intellectual one.

§5 Two problems with intellectual grandstanding.

By way of concluding this short paper, I will draw attention to two worrisome consequences of intellectual grandstanding: exclusion and cynicism. These brief points are speculative and intended to promote discussion. Intellectual grandstanding can lead to some people's exclusion from intellectual discourse. At the beginning of this paper, I quoted some remarks about intellectual grandstanding at an academic conference. To recap, Murphy and Stephen observed that such grandstanding shattered the confidence of those who were subjected to it, who were left 'questioning their place in the profession' (Murphy & Steffens, 2017, p. 15). It is interesting to

⁴ It is worth noting that this prejudice against emotion probably has a gendered aspect to it. Women's testimony is often met with a credibility deficit due to the stereotype that women are too emotional and that as a result they are incompetent as sources of knowledge. See, for example, Miranda Fricker's work on the testimonial injustices faced by women (2007).

note that, by Murphy and Stephen's lights, early career researchers are especially susceptible to this harmful consequence of intellectual grandstanding. It is plausible that when intellectual grandstanding is used to humiliate participants in an intellectual discourse, both the object of that humiliation and those who witness it will think twice about participating in scientific meetings. If competent and scientists are dissuaded from participating in these events, they are not the only ones to lose out: science itself suffers their absence. Tosi and Warmke explain how moral grandstanding leads to cynicism, in the form of 'skepticism and disillusionment about the sincerity of people's contribution to moral discourse' (2020, p. 78). It becomes hard to distinguish between serious contributions to moral discourse and insincere vanity projects. This is likely to impede moral progress. This can be applied with few changes to the case of intellectual grandstanding. Intellectual grandstanding leads to cynicism about intellectual life. If intellectual grandstanding dominates conference discussions, and this leads people to doubt the sincerity of a good portion of those participating in such discussions, then the value of participation in those discussions is diminished. In short, intellectual grandstanding not only offends and marginalises, it devalues intellectual discourse itself. And the consequences of this may be perceived beyond the walls of the academy: in a time where the value of science is under increased public scrutiny, we should take intellectual grandstanding seriously as a threat to public understanding.⁵

References

- Crewe, Bianca & Ichikawa, Jonathan Jenkins (forthcoming). Rape Culture and Epistemology. In Jennifer Lackey (Ed.), *Applied Epistemology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Doyle, Arthur Conan (1892/2002). *The adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. New York: Harper and Brothers. Project Gutenberg. Retrieved from: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1661/1661-h/1661-h.htm>
- Frankfurt, Harry (2005). *On bullshit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Fricke, Miranda (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Haack, Susan (2013). Six Signs of Scientism. In Susan Haack (Ed.), *Putting philosophy to work: Inquiry and its place in culture* (pp. 105-120). Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Murphy, Andrew & Steffens, Thomas (2017). Intellectual grandstanding: The ever-growing quandary of scientific meetings. *Spectrum* 24(5): 14-15.
- Tosi, Justin & Warmke, Brandon (2016). Moral grandstanding. *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 44(3): 197-217.
- (2020). *Grandstanding: The use and abuse of moral talk*. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁵ I would like to thank David Austin (York) for his encouraging comments on this paper. This research was financially supported by ANID (Chile), Fondecyt Postdoctorado Project No. 3200770.