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## Moral Grandstanding

Kurt Baier wrote that “moral talk is often rather repugnant. Leveling moral accusations, expressing moral indignation, passing moral judgment, allotting the blame, administering moral reproof, justifying oneself, and, above all, moralizing—who can enjoy such talk?”<sup>1</sup> When public moral discourse is at its best, we think that these features (if they are present at all) are unobjectionable. But we also think that, to some degree, Baier is right: public moral discourse—that is, talk intended to bring some matter of moral significance to the public consciousness—sometimes fails to live up to its ideal. Public moral discourse can go wrong in many ways. One such way is a phenomenon we believe to be pervasive: moral grandstanding (hereafter, “grandstanding”).<sup>2</sup> We begin by developing an account of grandstanding. We then show that our account, with support from some standard

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1. Kurt Baier, *The Moral Point of View: A Rational Basis of Ethics*, abridged ed. (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 3.

2. We think that there are cases of grandstanding that occur in nonmoral domains. One might, for example, grandstand about one’s intellect, achievements, or know-how. We focus our attention here on how grandstanding works in the moral domain.

theses of social psychology, explains the characteristic ways that grandstanding is manifested in public moral discourse. We conclude by arguing that there are good reasons to think that moral grandstanding is typically morally bad and should be avoided.

#### I. WHAT IS MORAL GRANDSTANDING?

Whatever else is true about the nature of morality, its real-world efficacy depends a great deal upon the practice of public moral discourse. The ability to discuss effectively matters of moral concern with other people is an indispensable tool both for interpersonal dealing and promoting moral improvement. One might expect to find universal reverence for such an important practice. At minimum, one would expect people to use the tools of moral talk carefully, so that they remain effective. But Baier's complaint about the repugnance of some moral talk strikes a chord, which suggests that public moral discourse is not living up to its ideal.

That moral talk sometimes goes wrong should be a matter of serious concern. When moral talk is repugnant, it may be bad for the practice of public moral discourse. It may be disrespectful to others to abuse the practice for the promotion of one's own interests. And it may speak ill of the character of the person engaging in repugnant moral talk. In short, moral talk itself can become a form of bad behavior. This article examines moral grandstanding, one prominent form of repugnant moral talk, and considers its moral implications.

For most readers, charges of moral grandstanding are familiar. Especially in contemporary politics, where healthy public discourse is vital, accusations of grandstanding are hard to miss. For example, on July 11, 2013, the US Senate opened up debate on new efforts to enact comprehensive immigration reform. In anticipation of the public discourse to follow, the American Immigration Council released a statement the same day, urging that "evidence, rather than grandstanding and rhetoric, should drive the debate on the Senate floor."<sup>3</sup> And Donald Trump's 2016 US presidential campaign website included the line "We need real solutions to address real problems. Not grandstanding or political

3. [www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/newsroom/release/senate-floor-debate-must-maintain-spirit-compromise](http://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/newsroom/release/senate-floor-debate-must-maintain-spirit-compromise).

agendas.”<sup>4</sup> We take it, however, that senators and presidential candidates are not the only ones liable to grandstand. Despite its being almost universally derided, grandstanding is a common occurrence in public discourse. But what is it?<sup>5</sup>

Our basic contention is that one grandstands when one makes a contribution to public moral discourse that aims to convince others that one is “morally respectable.” By this we mean that grandstanding is a use of moral talk that attempts to get others to make certain desired judgments about oneself, namely, that one is worthy of respect or admiration because one has some particular moral quality—for example, an impressive commitment to justice, a highly tuned moral sensibility, or unparalleled powers of empathy. To grandstand is to turn one’s contribution to public discourse into a vanity project.

In what follows, we give an account of central and distinctive features of the paradigmatic cases of grandstanding. Our view is that grandstanding, even of the moral variety, is a diverse and diffuse social phenomenon, much like, say, love, blame, forgiveness, complaint, and apology. And as is the case with these phenomena, we are skeptical that there is an illuminating and nontrivial set of necessary and sufficient conditions that capture the extension of the concept of grandstanding. Our diffuse grandstanding behaviors form a constellation, some of them closer to the center than others. The instances of grandstanding that make up the center of the constellation are the paradigmatic ones. We propose, then, to give an account of the paradigmatic cases by illuminating the features at the core of the phenomenon. Our account of grandstanding is therefore intended to capture those cases that persons familiar with the practice would most readily recognize as cases of grandstanding and would use as a frame of reference to judge whether a given phenomenon is a case of grandstanding (even if it is of a nonparadigmatic sort).

4. [www.donaldjtrump.com/positions/second-amendment-rights](http://www.donaldjtrump.com/positions/second-amendment-rights).

5. As best we can tell, the first recorded use of the term *grandstand* in the sense of “showing off” is from Michael Kelly’s book on American baseball titled *Play Ball: Stories of the Ball Field* (Boston: Emery and Hughes, 1888). The term was used to describe baseball players who liked to show off after making an impressive play: “It’s the little things of this sort which makes [sic] ‘the grand stand player.’ They make impossible catches, and when they get the ball they roll all over the field.” The idea must have been that such players were playing to the audience, those in the grandstands.

We do not claim, therefore, to give a complete analysis of the concept of grandstanding, or even an exhaustive account of the phenomenon. Our account of grandstanding is limited in scope: it seeks only to illuminate the kind of grandstanding that occurs in the context of public moral discourse. We do not intend to draw a sharp distinction between public and private moral discourse, but roughly speaking, public moral discourse involves communication that is intended to bring some moral matter to public consciousness. This is in contrast to typical private moral discourse, which usually involves communication not intended to be consumed by larger segments of the moral community.

We claim that the phenomenon of grandstanding is characterized by two central features. We will take them in turn. The first central feature is that the grandstander desires that others think of her as being morally respectable with regard to some matter of moral concern.<sup>6</sup> When we say that the grandstander desires that others think of her as morally respectable, we mean that she wants others to make a positive moral assessment of her or the group with which she identifies.

In some cases, a grandstander will want others to think of her simply as meeting some normative baseline whereas others fail to do so. Suppose that morality requires a certain minimum level of care about immigrants. Here, the grandstander might simply want to be seen as merely morally respectable in a world where she thinks that precious few meet even that minimum threshold. For example, a grandstander might desire that others come to believe that although virtually no one cares sufficiently about immigrants, the grandstander (or her group) does.

Sometimes, however, we judge that someone does not merely meet a minimum threshold of respectability, but is highly or eminently respectable—that is, we consider some people worthy of great moral respect. So there is another sense in which a grandstander may want to be seen as respectable by meeting a loftier standard. For example, one might want others to believe that while morality requires a certain level of concern for immigrants, one's own (or one's own group's) concern for immigrants far exceeds that threshold. In these cases, one wants others to think of one as being highly or exceptionally morally

6. We use the term *grandstander* here and throughout to refer not necessarily to a serial grandstander, but to someone who engages in an instance of grandstanding.

respectable. Here, one wants to be seen not merely as meeting a normative baseline. Rather, one wants to be seen as a paragon of morality.

The basic idea, then, is that a grandstander desires that other people recognize her as morally respectable. For ease of expression, call this desire the *recognition desire*.<sup>7</sup> The content of the recognition desire may be something as general as a desire merely to be thought of as “morally respectable,” broadly construed (though perhaps not under that exact description). Here, the grandstander simply wants a general form of admiration or respect for being “on the side of the angels.”

In other cases, the content of the recognition desire might be more fine-grained. Grandstanders may want to be seen as morally respectable in a number of ways. We suggest that she might want herself (or her group) to be seen as having, among other things, respectable moral beliefs (for example, about what truly counts as fairness, moral progress, or having moral integrity), moral sensibilities or emotions (for example, having a certain level of affective sensitivity to inequality), moral priorities (for example, caring about justice above all else), or practical moral judgment (for example, having an exceptional insight into what morally ought to be done).

By whom does the grandstander want to be recognized as morally respectable? It depends. In some cases, the grandstander will want those in her own in-group to think of her as morally respectable. One might, for example, seek to be recognized by members of one’s in-group as being on the “right side” of some issue.<sup>8</sup> In other cases, however, the grandstander will want members of an out-group to think of her as being eminently morally respectable. One might, for example, want people with whom one disagrees to recognize one’s superior moral judgment and so defer to one in moral discourse. In still other cases, one’s grandstanding will be directed at a general audience, with no intention of discriminating—one simply wants one’s audience to be impressed.

7. On one sense of the term *recognize*, to recognize that some subject S has property P implies that S actually is P. But this is not the sense we have in mind. The grandstander is after social recognition whether she is actually morally respectable or not. She wants to be *seen as* having P. The recognition desire requires only that one wants to be thought of as morally respectable by others.

8. Think of those who simply want others to believe that they, too, are on the “right side of history.”

Finally, we note that grandstanding does not require *believing* that one has a certain level of moral respectability. Imagine, for example, a politician who, in his speeches, feigns empathy for the plight of American factory workers because he wants voters to think that no one cares about them more than he does.

Let us now turn to the second central feature of grandstanding. When people grandstand, they do so by making some kind of contribution to public moral discourse: they say or write something, for example. Call this contribution the *grandstanding expression*. The second central feature is this: when one grandstands, one contributes a grandstanding expression in order to satisfy the recognition desire. In other words, one's grandstanding expressions are attempts to get others to believe that one is morally respectable.

Our claim here is that the recognition desire plays a motivating role in paradigmatic cases of grandstanding. Although the recognition desire may not be the only desire motivating the grandstanding expression, or even the strongest motivating desire, the recognition desire does make a significant motivating contribution. That is, the grandstander says what she does in large part because she desires that others think of her as morally respectable. However, our motives for acting are often mixed. Cases of grandstanding are no different. One might want for others to be impressed with one's unparalleled commitment to workers' rights and *also* hope that, after hearing what one has to say, others will take action to support the labor movement.

So how much motivational force must the recognition desire contribute for one's contribution to count as grandstanding? We think of grandstanding as a threshold notion. For a contribution to public moral discourse to count as grandstanding, the recognition desire must play a significant enough motivating role. Just how significant? We think that the desire must be strong enough that if the grandstander were to discover that no one actually came to think of her as morally respectable in the relevant way, she would be disappointed.

Given that we are elucidating the central and distinctive features of the paradigmatic cases, we stress that we do not claim that all cases of grandstanding *must* be motivated (to some degree or another) by the recognition desire. We suspect that there may be cases of a phenomenon properly called grandstanding in which the grandstander does not possess the recognition desire at all. We are open to the possibility that

grandstanding may sometimes spring from other motivational sources. For example, a person with little experience in public moral discourse might observe grandstanders in action, conclude that theirs is the ideal form of moral talk, and begin to mimic grandstanding expressions. Even though such a novice contributes in good faith, she can engage in a kind of grandstanding, though perhaps of a nonparadigmatic sort.

Additionally, some behavior we might plausibly describe as grandstanding may stem from a desire to silence a rival. In such cases, one's grandstanding may be intended to undermine the credibility of others. Even in these cases, though, we suspect that the way grandstanding often (but not always) functions is to silence a rival by presenting the speaker as *more* morally respectable by implicit contrast. Thus, grandstanding functions as an attempt to silence or discredit other discourse participants by communicating that their opinions are not worth considering or engaging because they are held by someone who is not morally respectable, or much less so. At any rate, we will focus on what we take to be the clearest cases of grandstanding—cases in which the grandstander does possess the recognition desire, and this desire plays a significant role in motivating her contribution to public moral discourse.

## II. THE MANIFESTATIONS OF GRANDSTANDING

In this section, we explore the characteristic ways that grandstanding is manifested in public moral discourse. As we will explain, grandstanding characteristically manifests itself in several phenomena: (1) piling on; (2) ramping up; (3) trumping up; (4) excessive emotional displays or reports; and (5) claims of self-evidence. A good, general account of the central features of grandstanding should have the resources to explain why it has these characteristic manifestations. We will show that the account we provided in Section 1, when conjoined with some standard theses in social psychology, does so.<sup>9</sup>

First, grandstanding often manifests itself in acts of *piling on*: the reiteration of something that has already been said in order to get in on the action, and to register one's inclusion on what one believes to be

9. We are grateful to the editors of *Philosophy & Public Affairs* for helpfully suggesting this way of framing this section, and from whom we have borrowed some language in doing so.

the right side. For example, suppose that numerous discussants have already expressed their view that a petition should be started to protest some injustice and that the matter is no longer up for debate. Yet someone might add the following:

*I want to echo what others have said. This petition is vital to the cause of justice and I happily and wholeheartedly support it. We need to show that we are on the right side of history.*

Our account explains why grandstanding would be manifested in this way: if one desires that others think of one as, say, being a member of a morally respectable group, an obvious strategy for satisfying this desire is to register one's view in the public square, even if doing so does not substantively advance discussion.

One way to understand piling on is as an expression of a widely studied phenomenon in social psychology—that of *social comparison*: people generally want to perceive themselves favorably and be perceived favorably by others.<sup>10</sup> Writing about the phenomenon of social comparison as manifested in the context of group deliberation, Cass Sunstein tells us that once discussants “hear what others believe, they adjust their positions in the direction of the dominant position.”<sup>11</sup> Members of the group, not wanting to be seen as cowardly or cautious in relation to other members of the group, will then register their agreement so as not to be perceived by others less favorably than those who have already spoken up. Piling on therefore offers a way of being perceived favorably by others. So grandstanders can pile on as a way of getting others to see them as members of a morally respectable group.

10. See, for example, Leon Festinger, “A Theory of Social Comparison Processes,” *Human Relations* 7 (1954): 117–40; Charles L. Gruder, “Determinants of Social Comparison Choices,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 7 (1971): 473–89; Jerry M. Suls and Richard L. Miller, eds., *Social Comparison Processes: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives* (New York: Hemisphere, 1977); G. Goethals and J. M. Darley, “Social Comparison Theory: An Attributional Approach,” in Suls and Miller, *Social Comparison Processes*, pp. 259–78; and Arie W. Kruglanski and Ofra Mayseless, “Classic and Current Social Comparison Research: Expanding the Perspective,” *Psychological Bulletin* 108 (1990): 195–208.

11. Cass Sunstein, “The Law of Group Polarization,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 10 (2002): 175–95, at p. 179.



Grandstanding also manifests itself in what we call *ramping up*, that is, making increasingly strong claims about the matter under discussion. Consider the following sort of exchange:

Ann: We can all agree that the senator's behavior was wrong and that she should be publicly censured.

Biff: Oh please—if we really cared about justice we should seek her removal from office. We simply cannot tolerate that sort of behavior and I will not stand for it.

Cal: As someone who has long fought for social justice, I'm sympathetic to these suggestions, but does anyone know the criminal law on this issue? I want to suggest that we should pursue criminal charges. We would all do well to remember that the world is watching.

Our general account also explains why grandstanding would often manifest itself in ramping up: if one of the possible motivations for grandstanding is to show that one is more morally respectable than others, then we can often expect a sort of moral arms race. Increasingly strong claims can be used to signal that one is more attuned to matters of justice and that others simply do not understand or appreciate the nuance or gravity of the situation.<sup>12</sup>

As with cases of piling on, psychological research on social comparison offers an explanation for why ramping up occurs. We can think of it this way. People often imagine themselves as occupying a certain position in comparison to others. For example, one might think that one is more morally respectable than most. Such a general judgment is often made before hearing what others say about their own views, however. Once we do hear what others' views are, we might need to shift our own views (or at least our presentation of them) in order to be

12. Though our above example of ramping up utilizes increasingly strong negative suggestions, notice that the ramping up may also trend in increasingly strong positive claims. One discussant may describe a person's behavior as "brave and worthy of our admiration," whereas another may claim that "this act was not only brave, but the most courageous and selfless act I have ever witnessed." Here, too, ramping up can be used to communicate that one is morally respectable—that one can identify paragons of morality where others cannot.

perceived (both by ourselves and by others) as retaining the position we previously took ourselves to hold.

To see this, recall the above conversation. Biff and Cal might have considered themselves to be morally respectable in some way about the matter under discussion. But this was before Ann made her own moral recommendation public. Once Ann offers her moral diagnosis, Biff and Cal now must make a move in order to retain their perceived position within the group. And so, as Sunstein tells us, while the dynamic behind social comparison “is that most people want to take a position of a socially preferred sort . . . no one can know what such a position would be until the positions of others are revealed. Thus individuals move their judgments in order to preserve their image to others and their image to themselves.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, not only will Biff’s and Cal’s grandstanding tend to push the group’s views toward one extreme, Ann herself may end up shifting her own view in order to maintain the image she wishes to project to the rest of the group.

Relatedly, grandstanding may take the form of what we can call *trumping up*: the insistence on the existence of a moral problem where there is none. If grandstanders are eager to show that they are morally respectable, they may be *too* eager to identify as moral problems things that others have (correctly) taken to be morally unproblematic. Trumping up functions to show that one is morally respectable insofar as one has, for example, a keener moral sense than others. Whereas some alleged injustices fall below the moral radar of many, they are not missed by the vigilant eye of the morally respectable. Our account explains this manifestation of grandstanding: one may try to show that one is morally respectable by trying to draw attention to features of the world that (rightly) seem morally unproblematic to others.

Fourth, grandstanding is often characterized by displays or reports of *excessive outrage* or other strong emotions. Where moral outrage gains purchase, the implicit assumption is that the most outraged person has the greatest moral insight or perhaps the strongest moral conviction about the issue under discussion. Empirical work on moral conviction reveals that emotional displays are often good indicators of how seriously someone takes a moral issue. For example, consider Linda Skitka’s well-known work in social psychology on “moral

13. Sunstein, “The Law of Group Polarization,” p. 179.

conviction,” “the strong and absolute belief that something is right or wrong, moral or immoral.”<sup>14</sup> Moral convictions are a subset of moral judgments distinguished by three features: (1) they are taken to be universal (not just, say, personal preference); (2) they are thought to identify easily discoverable and fairly obvious facts of the world; and (3) they are sources of very strong emotional responses that arise when, say, defending or protecting one’s absolute belief in right or wrong.<sup>15</sup> Of particular note here is Skitka’s finding that “there are strong connections between having moral convictions about issues and having correspondingly strong emotional reactions to these issues.”<sup>16</sup> She found that stronger emotional reactions to various acts or policies (she studied, for example, physician-assisted suicide and the Iraq War) correlated with stronger moral conviction about those acts or policies, and that this is so even when controlling for variables such as religiosity.<sup>17</sup>

It seems then that something like a display or report of one’s outrage about a moral issue can be a reliable signal of the strength of one’s moral conviction about it. If so, such emotional displays could be used strategically to communicate to others one’s own heightened moral convictions, relative to other group members. Grandstanders may then exploit this background assumption and so employ outrage to signal that they are more affected by moral disorder in the world, or empathize more fully with victims of wrongdoing. Such displays of outrage may lead others to regard one as more morally insightful or sensitive, and this is why our account explains why grandstanding so often involves excessive outrage: to be seen as more morally insightful or sensitive is one way of being seen as morally respectable.

Finally, the account of grandstanding we have proposed makes sense of the fact that grandstanders often claim that their views are self-evidently true: “If you cannot see that this is how we should respond, then I refuse to engage you any further.” Claims of *self-evidence* can be used to signal that one’s moral sensibilities are more finely

14. Linda J. Skitka et al., “Moral Conviction: Another Contributor to Attitude Strength or Something More?” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 88 (2005): 895–917, at p. 896.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Linda J. Skitka, “The Psychology of Moral Conviction,” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 4 (2010): 267–81, at p. 276.

17. *Ibid.*

tuned than those of others, and thus that one is morally respectable. What is not obvious to others is painfully obvious to the grandstander. Moreover, any suggestion of moral complexity or expression of doubt, uncertainty, or disagreement is often declaimed by the grandstander as revealing a deficiency in either sensitivity to moral concerns or commitment to morality itself.<sup>18</sup>

### III. THE MORALITY OF GRANDSTANDING

We suspect that most people would agree that grandstanding is annoying. We think that it is also morally problematic. In our view, the vast majority of moral grandstanding is bad, and, in general, one should not grandstand. We will adduce some reasons for this view shortly, but we should make a few preliminary points.

First, we will not argue that grandstanding should never be done. We are open to the possibility that there are circumstances in which either an instance of grandstanding possesses no bad-making features or, even if an instance does have bad-making features, the option of *not* grandstanding will be even worse.

Second, we will not claim that people who grandstand are bad people in virtue of engaging in grandstanding. We all have flaws that are on occasion revealed in the public square. Engaging in grandstanding is not obviously worse than many other flaws, and a propensity to grandstand is not indefeasible evidence that someone lacks good character.

Third, although we do believe that grandstanding is typically bad and should not be done, we are not prescribing any particular social enforcement mechanisms to deal with it. Presently, our concerns are the nature of grandstanding and its moral status. It does not follow, at least in any straightforward way, that people should intervene in public moral discourse to discourage others from grandstanding, or to blame them for grandstanding.

Fourth, we distinguish between (a) an objection to the morality of an individual instance of grandstanding and (b) an objection to the morality of the more general social practice of grandstanding. For example, a specific instance of grandstanding may lack a certain

18. Indeed, grandstanders often deny that their views are in need of any defense (or that were they to give a defense, the implication is that their audience would not be enlightened enough to understand or appreciate it).

bad-making feature G even though that specific instance may play an important causal role in the promotion of a widespread practice of grandstanding that does have feature G. The converse may also hold: individual acts of grandstanding may be bad in ways that do not apply to the more general practice. Some of our criticisms will indict grandstanding at both of these levels. Other criticisms will be aimed at only one or the other of these levels. Throughout, we will note the target of each objection.

Finally, we note that one's considered views about the morality of grandstanding will depend in no small part on one's views about normative ethics more generally. We try to remain neutral among moral theories and intend only to raise a number of moral problems with grandstanding. The considerations we adduce, however, are diverse. There is, as it were, something here for just about everyone.

Consider, first, the deleterious effects that grandstanding—both individual instances of it and its general practice—typically has on public moral discourse. To bring these effects into relief, it is helpful to compare grandstanding to a similar discursive phenomenon: bullshitting. Harry Frankfurt famously argued that one of the problematic features of bullshitting is that it has little to do with the justifying purpose or primary aim of the more general practice with which it is associated. Indeed, bullshitting interferes with the efficacy of making assertions that discussants believe to be true.<sup>19</sup> As more people begin bullshitting, the quality of discourse declines, becomes less trustworthy, and so on.

Although grandstanding need not be a form of bullshitting, it can similarly interfere with the efficacy of public discourse. To see why, consider that public moral discourse may do a number of things, but the core, primary function that justifies the practice is to identify publicly certain moral features of a state of affairs, and sometimes additionally to explain the evaluation of that state or recommend some

19. Frankfurt includes the following analogous case: "Spit-and-polish and red tape do not genuinely contribute, it is presumed, to the 'real' purposes of military personnel or government officials, even though they are imposed by agencies or agents that purport to be conscientiously devoted to the pursuit of those purposes. Thus the 'unnecessary routine tasks or ceremonial' that constitute bull are disconnected from the legitimating motives of the activity upon which they intrude, just as the things people say in bull sessions are disconnected from their settled beliefs, and as bullshit is disconnected from a concern with the truth." Harry G. Frankfurt, "On Bullshit," in *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

fitting response. In short, the aim of public moral discourse is to improve people's moral beliefs, or to spur moral improvement in the world. To be sure, individual contributions to public moral discourse sometimes aim to achieve additional goals. Aiming at some other goal in addition to improving beliefs and spurring improvement is not necessarily a bad thing. But doing so could be problematic if it would undermine our ability to fulfill the primary aims of public moral discourse. We think that grandstanding does interfere with the primary function of public moral discourse, and that this is one reason to think that it—like bullshitting—is morally problematic. Here, we discuss three bad effects of grandstanding that, in our view, interfere with the primary function of discourse: increased cynicism, outrage exhaustion, and group polarization. We will take them in turn.

Grandstanding likely promotes an unhealthy cynicism about moral discourse. Why? Cynicism, as we use the term here, is a form of skepticism and disillusionment about the sincerity of people's contributions to moral discourse.<sup>20</sup> Recall that many instances of grandstanding occur because grandstanders want to be regarded as being on the side of the angels. However, once observers come to see this as a common motivation for moral claims, they may naturally begin to think that moral discourse is really all about showing that your heart is in the right place.

Grandstanding therefore may play a significant role in breeding cynicism about moral discourse. While moral discourse may unfold under the *pretense* of addressing injustice, many contributions are in fact intended to get others to believe that one is morally respectable. Thus, as grandstanding becomes more widespread, it leads to a devaluation of the social currency of moral talk.<sup>21</sup> And even if individual instances of grandstanding only directly produce a little bit of cynicism, they may end up indirectly producing a lot more cynicism

20. See, for example, L. M. Andersson, "Employee Cynicism: An Examination Using a Contract Violation Framework," *Human Relations* 49 (1996): 95–418.

21. Aside from its effects on public moral discourse, cynicism may have other bad effects. There is evidence that it negatively affects workplace environments (P. H. Mirvis and D. Kanter, "Combatting Cynicism in the Workplace," *National Productivity Review* 8 [1989]: 377–94), and it has even been linked to increased risk for dementia (E. Neuvonen et al., "Late-Life Cynical Distrust, Risk of Incident Dementia, and Mortality in a Population-Based Cohort," *Neurology* 82 [2014]: 2205–12) and heart disease (H. Tindle et al., "Optimism, Cynical Hostility, and Incident Coronary Heart Disease and Mortality in the Women's Health Initiative," *Circulation* 120 [2009]: 656–62).

due to what Kruger and Gilovich call “naïve cynicism,” a cognitive bias that leads us to expect that others are more egocentrically biased than is actually the case.<sup>22</sup> In other words, even if individual instances themselves produce only a little bit of cynicism, this directly generated cynicism may prejudice us to be more cynical about public moral discourse in general, even when no one is grandstanding. The presence of the general practice of grandstanding therefore becomes a source of even more cynicism. Indeed, some might accuse us as authors of being unduly cynical about public discourse. Perhaps this is so—perhaps we are naïvely cynical. But we suspect that this heightened cynicism is due in part to the existence of a general practice of grandstanding. Because we know many people engage in it, this makes it easier to be cynical about moral discourse in general. But this, of course, is exactly our point.

Another way that grandstanding may devalue public moral discourse is through what we call outrage exhaustion. Because grandstanding so often involves excessive outrage or other overt emotional displays, we predict that participants in public moral discourse will often have a more difficult time recognizing when outrage is a reliable signal of injustice, and will also find it increasingly difficult to muster outrage when it actually is appropriate. Our concern, therefore, is not about moral outrage as such—we think that there are plenty of injustices for which moral outrage is wholly fitting. Nor is our concern that people may disagree about when certain degrees of outrage are fitting. Rather, the worry is that because grandstanding can involve emotional displays that are disproportionate to their object, and because grandstanding often takes the form of ramping up, a public discourse overwhelmed by grandstanding will be subject to this cheapening effect. This can happen at the level of individual cases of grandstanding, but it is especially harmful to discourse when grandstanding is widely practiced.

Relatedly, because grandstanding often results in what we have called ramping up and trumping up, it contributes to group polarization, the phenomenon by which members of a deliberating group tend

22. J. Kruger and T. Gilovich, “‘Naïve Cynicism’ in Everyday Theories of Responsibility Assessment: On Biased Assumptions of Bias,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 76 (1999): 743–53.

to move toward more extreme viewpoints.<sup>23</sup> So, for example, imagine that after a highly publicized school shooting, a group of people in the community gathers to consider proposing new gun control measures. Suppose that most of the group tentatively supports new gun control measures at the outset. After deliberation, however, the group will tend to move toward enthusiastic support for those same new laws. This is group polarization.<sup>24</sup>

One reason for this, as Sunstein argues, has to do with the phenomenon of social comparison discussed above: discussants “desire to maintain their reputation and their self-conception.”<sup>25</sup> And so when it comes to grandstanding, if members of a group are motivated to outdo one another with their contributions to public moral discourse, then their group dynamic will tend to push them to advocate increasingly extreme views.

This effect not only increases the likelihood that participants advocate false views; it also encourages an impression in persons not associated with the group that morality is a nasty business, and that moral discourse consists primarily of extreme and implausible claims. This effect, too, can happen at both levels. In a particular discussion, one or more acts of grandstanding can promote polarization, such as in the example Sunstein gives. But after repeated iterations of conversations where grandstanding is introduced across large segments of a population, the views (or purported views) of entire groups can become more polarized.

It should be admitted, however, that despite all these possible negative effects, individual instances of grandstanding can sometimes bring about good consequences. Grandstanders may inspire followers and cause social pressure for reform in cases that might otherwise have escaped public attention. The statements of grandstanders might serve as effective coordination points when groups are otherwise unable to reach consensus. And the grandstanding lead singer of an activist punk rock band might move a listless seventeen-year-old to “check out” the

23. See, for example, Johannes A. Zuber et al., “Choice Shift and Group Polarization: An Analysis of the Status of Arguments and Social Decision Schemes,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 62 (1992): 50–61.

24. We borrow this example from Sunstein, “The Law of Group Polarization,” pp. 175–76.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 176.



presidential campaign of Ralph Nader, and thereby indirectly lead him to a lifetime of engagement with moral and political philosophy. These and any number of other good things might happen because of grandstanding. But even when grandstanding promotes the good, it may still contribute the negative effects we have described. Moreover, its effectiveness in bringing about these positive results does not go unnoticed by those who would use it for ill. And so even if there are cases of grandstanding with good results, this may encourage others to grandstand in ways that promote bad results.

Concerns about the effects of grandstanding aside, there is also good reason to think that grandstanding is usually disrespectful to those one addresses when one grandstands. Public moral discourse is a practice that can work more or less well. The degree to which it is effective depends on whether participants conform to rules—explicit or otherwise—that promote the ends of the practice, whatever the advantages of individual defection. Suppose, then, that grandstanding generally succeeds in conferring upon the grandstander some public recognition of her putative moral respectability. If this is so, then grandstanding can be understood as a form of free riding on the more general practice of public moral discourse: the grandstander gains whatever benefits are generated by participants in public moral discourse who do not grandstand, while also accruing the additional benefit of public recognition for herself. The grandstander benefits from the cooperation of others without accepting the costs of cooperation for herself. She acts as if she regards herself as above the rules that constrain everyone else's behavior, and so disrespects them.

Put differently, the primary aim of public moral discourse is to promote improvement in people's moral beliefs and behavior. The grandstander engages in behavior that would undermine the primary aim of the practice she exploits for her own benefit if the same privileges she claims for herself were extended to everyone. If grandstanding became the dominant form of public moral discourse, then public moral discourse would likely cease to be effective at promoting its primary aim. At best, it would instead merely promote awareness of participants' moral respectability. Furthermore, there is good reason to hold that even single instances of grandstanding—which individually have practically no effect on the efficacy of public moral discourse more generally—are morally problematic. For if we are right that grandstanding is

often a form of free riding and free riding is typically disrespectful of those with whom we interact, then individual instances of grandstanding are also typically disrespectful.

We think it worth noting that this concern yields a reason in favor of talking about the phenomenon of grandstanding: when enough people in a discussion know about grandstanding, it becomes less personally beneficial to grandstand, and so grandstanding will be disincentivized. It will cease to serve as an effective means of satisfying the recognition desire, as participants in public moral discourse will be less likely to give the grandstander the social recognition that she seeks.

Individual instances of grandstanding can also be disrespectful in a different way. When grandstanders aim to show that they are morally respectable, they sometimes implicitly claim an exalted status for themselves as superior judges of the content of morality and its proper application. Grandstanding can thus be a kind of “power grab.” For instance, one might employ grandstanding in order to seek greater status within an in-group as a kind of moral sage. Alternatively, grandstanders sometimes dismiss the dissenting claims of others as being beneath the attention of the morally respectable. This is an objectionable way of dealing with one’s peers in public moral discourse because in general we ought to regard one another as just that—peers. We should speak to each other as if we are on relatively equal footing, and act as if moral questions can only be decided by the quality of reasoning presented rather than the identity of the presenter himself. But grandstanders seem sometimes to deny this, and in so doing disrespect their peers.

It might be objected that it is common in public moral discourse to call for deference from others in light of, say, one’s specialized experience that confers a superior moral insight that others lack. In the public outcry over the *Bowe Bergdahl* case, for instance, in which five members of the Taliban detained by the United States were freed in exchange for the release of a single American soldier, some members of the military community defended the general practice of prisoner exchange by invoking their experience. They could understand better than civilians, they said, why the practice is defensible and morally important.

Let us grant the premise that the military community was correct—they do have a deeper insight into the worth of the practice than do

civilians—and that everyone would have more accurate beliefs by deferring to the voice of experience. We recognize that there may be forms of moral knowledge that some can gain only by accepting the testimony of others, and so there may be such a thing as moral expertise.<sup>26</sup> But we also think that this notion is widely abused in public moral discourse. People too often break off discussion by saying that those who disagree with them could not possibly be made to understand while leaving untapped argumentative resources for helping them understand—or, indeed, failing to consider that they themselves might be mistaken. In these cases, we think it clear that it would be better if, rather than invoking their purported respectable moral status and telling their peers that they simply could not understand, those with greater moral insight offered reasons accessible to all. So even though claims of moral expertise may sometimes be epistemically warranted, advertent to one's moral expertise in public discourse as a way to change minds or spur moral improvement may still be a deficient form of address.

Finally, we think that the incongruity between the subject matter of public moral discourse and the behavior and motivation of grandstanders often justifies a negative aretaic judgment. Individual acts of grandstanding are typically self-promoting, and so grandstanding can reveal a narcissistic or egoistic self-absorption.<sup>27</sup> Public moral discourse involves talking about serious and important issues: the evaluation of conditions that greatly affect the well-being of millions of people, the leveling of accusations that could ruin lives, the consideration of a policy that could save or ruin a state and its subjects, and so on. These are matters that generally call for other-directed concern, and yet grandstanders find a way to make discussion at least partly about themselves. In using public moral discourse to promote an image of themselves to others, grandstanders turn their contributions

26. For a helpful discussion, see Karen Jones, "Second-Hand Moral Knowledge," *Journal of Philosophy* 96 (1999): 55–78.

27. Grandstanding can be narcissistic even when it is uncharacteristic for a person and so does not display a defect of character. As we will argue below, we think that grandstanding is typically not something that a virtuous person would engage in. If that is correct, then even occasional acts of grandstanding can open one up to certain kinds of negative aretaic judgments, such as the criticism that one is acting ostentatiously or narcissistically, even if one does not have the corresponding negative character traits. We thank the editors of *Philosophy & Public Affairs* for raising this point.

to moral discourse into a vanity project. Consider the incongruity between, say, the moral gravity of a world-historic injustice, on the one hand, and a group of acquaintances competing for the position of being most morally offended by it, on the other.

Such behavior, we think, is not the sort of thing we should expect from a virtuous person. According to many virtue theories (and many other ethical theories, besides), what determines the moral quality of an act is not simply the nature of your action, but also your motivation for so acting.<sup>28</sup> As we understand grandstanding, the grandstander's motivation is largely egoistic; she is using public moral discourse to secure certain kinds of recognition for herself. The virtuous person's motivation for engaging in public moral discourse, however, would not be largely egoistic; the virtuous person would not typically be motivated to seek out recognition, approval, or praise for her putative moral virtue. But what kinds of reasons would typically motivate the virtuous in their contributions to public moral discourse?

We do not need to take a stand, but we suggest two possible motivations. First, the virtuous person might be motivated for other-directed reasons: she wants to help others think more carefully about the relevant issues, or she wants to give arguments and reasons in order to challenge others' thinking in a way that promotes understanding. Second, the virtuous person might be motivated for principled reasons: she simply cares about having true moral beliefs and acting virtuously, and so wants others to believe what is true about morality and act for the right moral reasons. All we claim here is that the virtuous person's motivation, unlike the grandstander's, is not largely egoistic.<sup>29</sup>

To conclude, then, we think that for a number of reasons, moral grandstanding—both in its individual manifestations and as a general social practice—is typically morally bad and ought not to be done. We take ourselves to have established a strong moral presumption against grandstanding.

28. See, for example, Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), 1105a31–32.

29. We thank Christian Miller for discussion about the motivations that virtuous persons might have when engaging in public discourse.

## IV. CONCLUSION

We have suggested that moral grandstanding is a pervasive feature of public moral discourse. And we have argued that, for a variety of reasons, grandstanding is also morally problematic. Yet we remain optimistic about the prospects for a healthy and robust public moral discourse. One reason for optimism is that we reject the view that it is inevitable that as long as there is public moral discourse, grandstanding will be common. It might be tempting to take this dim view—to be resigned to the rather depressing thought that moral talk just is, as Baier put it, rather repugnant. But there is nothing about our practice of moral talk or the purposes to which it is admirably put that demands that interlocutors seek recognition for their purported morally respectable status. While it may be true that humans have deep needs for recognition, it is not inevitable that they will seek it in every context, especially when they see that there are many contexts in which doing so would be inappropriate. And just as people need not seek recognition through grandstanding, others need not reward grandstanders with the recognition they seek. Once we reflect on grandstanding, its moral status, and the justifying aims of public discourse, we may be less inclined to grandstand, and less impressed by the grandstanding of others.