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Objects of virtue: 'moral grandstanding' and the capitalization of ethics under neoliberal commodity fetishism

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ABSTRACT

This article critiques conspicuous displays of morality within public discourse, recently framed as 'moral grandstanding', from the perspective of an intersubjective Critical Realist theory of ethics. Drawing on Honneth's recognition theory as the basis of a 'qualified explanatory critique', I argue that these practices are not mere aberrations within moral discourse, but a necessary consequence of the neoliberal imperative to turn all aspects of the self into market assets. Neoliberal commodity fetishism also and especially involves the commodification of moral character as a means of economic competition, as exemplified in recent discussions of 'ethical capital'. This objectification categorically precludes intersubjectivity as the basis of ethical life, and produces a cognitive structure resembling narcissistic pathology, characterized by the pervasive objectification of self and other. Critical Realists should therefore reject moral grandstanding not only for its detrimental effects on public discourse, but because in subordinating morality to the market, it is fundamentally anti-ethical.

1. Introduction

Conspicuous displays of morality, most often in the context of social media, have become a 'hot topic' within ethical meta-discourse – i.e. conversations about the way we talk about ethics – in recent years. Framed as 'moral grandstanding' (Tosi and Warmke 2016, 2020a, 2020b), or more controversially as 'virtue signalling',[1] the practice of trying to enhance one's social status by flouting one's putative moral superiority has become a focus of public and scholarly interest. It is closely related to a resurgence of public shaming practices in online environments, which have most recently figured under the labels 'callout culture' or 'cancel culture' (e.g. Clark 2020). These terms refer to the enforcement of collective moral norms through identifying and denouncing individual norm violators, most often accompanied by calls for, and enactment of, a cultural and economic boycott. While these forms of contemporary public shaming are analytically distinct from moral grandstanding itself, in practice the former requires the latter to justify the legitimacy of the collective norms being enforced, as well as the entitlement of the enforcer

(s) to do so. Critics of moral grandstanding, such as Tosi and Warmke, argue that it has various corroding effects on public moral discourse: it undermines trust in the credibility of moral claims, leads to 'outrage exhaustion', increases polarization, and poses a threat to free expression (2016, 2020a). Others have defended the practice, arguing that it ultimately improves public moral discourse by providing higher-order evidence of existing or emerging social norms (e.g. Levy 2020; Westra 2021). However, both affirmative and critical accounts of moral grandstanding focus on its immediate effects on public discourse, without asking more probing questions about why this form of ethical conduct has become so salient at this particular historical juncture, or indeed, whether it should be considered ethical conduct at all.

In this article, I therefore offer what I will refer to as a 'qualified explanatory critique' of grandstanding, on the basis of an intersubjective Critical Realist understanding of ethics. Drawing on Andrew Sayer's suggestion of a 'qualified Ethical Naturalism' (2003), as well as Axel Honneth's theory of ethics as intersubjective recognition (1996, 2004, 2014), I argue that a restricted focus on the politics of discourse obscures the nature of moral grandstanding as both a result and a means of socio-economic competition under neoliberal capitalism. Moral grandstanding is thus a consequence of the neoliberal imperative to objectify every part of the self – including one's moral character – for economic purposes, put into predatory overdrive by hyperindividualization, precarity and cut-throat competition in an increasingly social-media driven marketplace. In order to make this point, I will begin by briefly describing the phenomenon of grandstanding, and relating it to an emerging literature which frames morality under the heading of 'ethical capital' (Betta 2016; McEachern 2016; Ghasemi et. al. 2017; Ridley-Duff, Seanor, and Bull 2011; Frith 2014; Bull et al. 2008, 2010; Gupta et.al. 2003, 2001). Drawing an analogy to social capital, this literature proposes to frame moral values as a type of market asset, designed to help individuals and organizations gain an edge over the competition. As I will argue, moral grandstanding is thus to 'ethical capital' what networking is to 'social capital' – an accumulative practice aimed not primarily at building (ethical) relationships for their own sake, but at increasing one's market success. Moreover, just as accumulating 'social capital' involves objectifying others as assets, so does moral grandstanding involve the objectification of ethical others as tools to promote one's 'personal brand'.

I will then briefly outline my method, which I refer to as a 'qualified explanatory critique', in the context of recent Critical Realist debates on ethics. Specifically addressing criticisms of Bhaskar's original theory of explanatory critique and its relationship to Ethical Naturalism and Moral Realism, I will opt for a compromise in the form of a 'qualified Ethical Naturalism' as proposed by Sayer (2003). I will suggest that Axel Honneth's psychoanalytic interpretation of Hegel's ethical thought is a more promising candidate for a Critical Realist theory of ethics than the so-far proposed alternatives, because it allows consideration of the embodied, pre-verbal dimension of ethics, without reducing the ethical to the linguistic, or producing an overly reified account of ethical characteristics such as 'values' or 'virtues'. Proceeding to apply these theoretical instruments to the phenomenon of moral grandstanding, I will draw on Honneth's Hegelian ethics as a process of mutual recognition to argue that failures of intersubjectivity result not only in social conflict, but also in specific cognitive distortions of the embodied self, which psychodynamic theories refer to as 'narcissism'. Whilst colloquially associated with vanity or excessive self-regard, narcissism is characterized primarily by a pervasive

objectification of self and other, which renders intersubjective recognition – and thus ethics in a Hegelian sense – impossible.

On this basis, I will then discuss that while narcissistic character structures may be caused by suboptimal individual development as outlined by Honneth, they are also a necessary feature of marketized social relations under (neoliberal) commodity fetishism more generally. I will therefore read narcissism not just as individual pathology, but as a pervasive social (or perhaps more correctly, antisocial) phenomenon under developed commodity fetishism. In ethical terms, this means that just as the theory of 'ethical capital' demands, one's own moral character, as well as the moral 'other', become instrumentalized as economic assets in an increasingly individualized and competitive marketplace. From this perspective, moral grandstanding, both in its more benign guise as mere status-seeking, and in its predatory form as a means of removing morally deficient others from the marketplace, can be seen as a specific form of narcissism, characterized by the instrumentalization of ethics as a sales technique for a commodified 'false self'. In conclusion, I will therefore argue that in the spirit of explanatory critique, grandstanding should be rejected not only for the reasons Tosi and Warmke outline, but also because it is based on a necessary false belief that treats subjects as if they were objects, and thus both undermines ethical life in a Hegelian sense, and perverts the ethical by subordinating it to the market.

2. Moral grandstanding and the theory of 'ethical capital'

Tosi and Warmke offer the following definition of moral grandstanding:

> Moral grandstanding is the use of moral talk for self-promotion. More precisely, grandstanding has two essential elements. First, grandstanders want others to be impressed with their moral qualities—that is, the purity of their moral beliefs, their level of commitment to justice, their skill at discovering moral insights, and so on. We call this the "Recognition Desire." Second, grandstanders try to satisfy that desire by contributing some expression to public moral discourse. We call that public display the "Grandstanding Expression." Taken together, the basic idea is that a person grandstands when she says or writes something as part of some public moral discussion in an attempt to impress others with her putative moral qualities. (Tosi and Warmke 2020b, 171)

As motivations for grandstanding, the authors identify 'using moral talk to seem morally superior, increase [one's] social standing within a group, and dominate and silence [one's] supposed moral inferiors' (2020b, 78). Grandstanders thus want to be seen as morally 'better than' others – their main concern is not with the specific moral issue they purport to care about, but with how others view them. Tosi and Warmke distinguish grandstanding from the more contentious term 'virtue signalling' for two reasons: first, because the latter term is commonly (and negatively) associated with the political left, while grandstanding is taking place across the political spectrum, and second, because the biological concept of 'signalling' arguably means something considerably different than the intentional display of particular qualities, moral or otherwise (37). They then go on to present several arguments against grandstanding: it fosters discursive polarization, leads to cynicism about the motivations behind moral claims, has detrimental effects on public discourse by suppressing freedom of speech, and produces 'outrage exhaustion' on part of an audience overwhelmed with constant exhortations to

support increasingly extreme moral positions (68f). Finally, the authors point to the problematic group dynamics produced in this manner, characterized as 'piling on, ramping up, trumping up, displays of strong emotion, and dismissiveness' (78), which easily spiral out of control into more or less justifiable instances of public shaming.

While I do not at all disagree with these criticisms, one question remains comparably under-illuminated in Tosi and Warmke's account: if, as they assert, moral grandstanding is an ages-old and relatively universal phenomenon, then why are we currently seeing such rise in both these behaviours, and in public and scholarly interest in them? The authors' reluctance to address this question may in part be due to the fact that they draw heavily on social and evolutionary psychology, and to an extent adopt the universalizing, ahistorical impetus of these disciplines. In part, it may also be that the focus of their analysis on the effects of grandstanding on public moral discourse limits their view to the discursive/linguistic dimension of the problem. However, while this allows them to provide a comprehensive account of what grandstanding is and how it works, it does not help to explain why in recent years, it has become so ubiquitous it is now subject to its own moral panic. {}In the following, I therefore want to take a slightly different approach, and argue that the current increase in both grandstanding itself and talk about it can be understood by looking at its socio-economic dimension.

As Bloom (2017) points out, although neoliberalism is commonly portrayed as the amoral promotion of pure economic self-interest, it would be more correctly described as entailing a 'privatisation' of ethics, whereby subjects – individuals and organizations alike – are called to 'ethically self-regulate' in order to offset the absence of any collective moral oversight over markets (see also: Abend 2014; Miller and Rose 2008). In this context, grandstanding can thus be seen as a practice aimed at demonstrating that one is not only able to perform this self-regulation, but excels at it. Moreover, as Foucault observed, neoliberal governmentality dissolves the traditional categories of worker and capitalist, and turns every individual into an 'entrepreneur of themselves': 'being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings' (Foucault 2008, 226). *Homo œconomicus* in this sense is thus not just an entrepreneur of his own labour power, but his entire being in its physical, cognitive and affective dimensions becomes at the same time its own commodity, capital asset, marketing department and distribution channel. Finally, neoliberal capitalism accompanies an increase in both individualized precarity – a permanent state of uncertainty as to one's economic standing and future – and intensifying competition in progressively faltering, deregulated labour markets. These developments therefore increase pressure on individuals to find new avenues of capitalizing on their assets, including every aspect of their own being, and to communicate to other market participants that they are entrepreneurs of particularly competitive selves.

This totalizing market logic does not stop at a person's moral or ethical capacities: under neoliberalism, one's moral character, rather than merely a status symbol, becomes a veritable market asset. Nowhere has this fact been more strikingly described than in an emerging literature in business and organizational studies, which frames the topic in a Bourdieusian vein as 'Ethical Capital' (Betta 2016; McEachern 2016; Ghasemi 2017; Ridley-Duff, Seanor, and Bull 2011; Frith 2014; Bull et al. 2008, 2010). The 'ethical capital' literature views morality, specifically the moral character of a person or organization, in terms of 'an economic asset … [yielding] competitive advantage' (Wagner-

Tsukamoto 2005, 77; see also Freel 2013). Most commonly, authors draw on a version of virtue ethics (e.g Arvidsson and Peitersen 2013), to conceptualize the process of 'self-fashioning' an ethical character for this purpose. As under neoliberalism, 'competition has been made the guiding ethics of everyday life' (Kumar 2010, 55), all activities 'must be compared with a form of production, an investment, and a cost calculation … so as to survive' (Dardot and Laval 2014, 263). With economics thus a-priori the ends of morality, the means must be for the individual to become a life-long entrepreneur of his own moral self: '(e)thical capital is […] a form of accumulation of ethical capabilities that might have started early in life. Accordingly … birth represents the start-up of a personal enterprise from which ethical capabilities can be expanded' (Betta 2016, 123). The same principle, applies to organizations 'for which ethical capital is a valuable resource in cultivating flexibility, nurturing a culture of innovation, or building an attractive brand' (Arvidsson and Peitersen 2013, 198; see also Raile 2013). Ethical capital authors go as far as to propose such 'ethical wealth' (Betta 2016, 125) should be quantified and measured (Frith 2014) and recommend the development of new instruments to track 'ethical input/output' (Bull and Ridley-Duff 2019) in categories such as 'honesty', 'integrity', 'reliability', 'humility' and so forth (Ghasemi et al. 2017).

This almost comically reductivist notion of ethics as some form of moral KPI accountancy finds a practical reflection in the fact that moral grandstanding, in its current incarnation as a mainly online behaviour, has a notable economic slant. On the one hand, companies may grandstand (and be subsequently accused of 'virtue signalling', 'greenwashing' and similar) over any number of social or environmental causes in order to enhance their brand image. On the other hand, individuals routinely engage in a range of strategies geared at enhancing their own 'personal brand' online, from professing 'allyship' with disadvantaged groups to using specific symbols – most recently, the conspicuous display of personal pronouns – in order to be perceived as 'morally safe' to engage with. Social media have blurred the line between the personal and the professional to the extent that any personal utterance, even made years previously, can make or break a precarious career, and so any type of online interaction must ultimately be treated as a potential job application or sales pitch. This economic dimension of public moral talk becomes especially obvious in the context of some of the more contentious phenomena Tosi and Warmke refer to, such as online shaming, 'callouts' or 'cancel culture'.[2] These practices usually involve a coordinated effort to not just shame a person for real or perceived wrongdoing, but specifically to denounce them to their employer or customer base, with the aim of getting them fired and/or removed from the marketplace.

In these predatory forms, grandstanding is thus not just about displaying one's 'moral wealth' or pointing to the other person's poverty in this area, but quite explicitly about practically removing the moral miscreant's material basis of survival.[3] This aspect, I want to suggest, cannot be sufficiently explained through merely status or dominance seeking, as Tosi and Warmke attempt, although it certainly entails these. If neoliberalism has indeed succeeded in 'universaliz[ing] the ethos of competition—to render it a central and constitutive feature of every social relation and institution' (Bloom 2017, 16) to the extent that morality itself has become a competitive market strategy, then the theory of 'ethical capital' finds its practical application in grandstanding as a form of morality-based economic war of all against all. It thereby undermines the social purpose of ethics in general, and of specific moral utterances in particular, and turns them into a

strategic function of market competition. Moreover, it entails a specific form of objectification of the self – as inherent in the idea of 'self-fashioning', which necessarily involves a fashioner and a fashioned – and of the other as merely a means to an economic end. In the next section, I will therefore briefly outline my use of 'qualified explanatory critique', before using this concept to argue that based on a Critical Realist understanding of ethics as intersubjective, moral grandstanding should be seen as not just unethical, but anti-ethical.

3. Qualified explanatory critique and a critical realist ethics of recognition

Critical Realist discussions of ethics in recent years have substantially focused on the question to what extent Bhaskar's concept of explanatory critique and the associated concepts of Ethical Naturalism (EN) and Moral Realism (MR) hold up to scrutiny. While it is not the purpose of this paper to settle these debates, I will briefly outline my own approach, which aims to put the theory of explanatory critique to work in a practical sense, without making any strong claims about the ontological status of values, or the timeless truth of ethical arguments. Following Andrew Sayer's proposition of a 'qualified ethical naturalism' (2003, 2), I will refer to this approach as a 'qualified explanatory critique': the 'qualified' part points to a pragmatic compromise between Bhaskar's theory and the critiques that a number of Critical Realist authors have mounted against it. Bhaskar's original formulation held that values can be derived from facts in such cases where it can be shown that a belief P about an object O, which is rooted in a causal source S, is false. We can then, *ceteris paribus*, proceed to a negative evaluation of S, thus deriving an evaluation from a fact (Bhaskar 2009). Bhaskar later extended this 'cognitive' version of explanatory critique with a 'needs-based' version, which asserts that we can also reject a causal structure if it can be shown to result in human needs not being met (2008). This view substantially informs his concepts of EN and MR, as he thus argues that ethical reasoning can and should employ a similar mode of argument as inherent in scientific naturalism (EN), and that it can potentially also lead to the identification of moral statements that are universally and timelessly true, independently of any subjective moral position (MR). A number of Critical Realists (and others) have raised objections to this formulation, broadly unified by the argument that ethical naturalism cannot be treated in the same way as scientific naturalism because the 'discovery' of values following from explanatory critique itself depends on presupposed values (Collier 1998). For example, as Dave Elder-Vass (2010) points out, the very idea that false beliefs ought to be removed depends on a positive evaluation of truth, which constitutes a value judgment. Others add that this equally applies in the case of arguments against beliefs that fail to support human needs, since the idea that human needs should be met also entails an a-priori evaluation (Hammersley 2002). Elder-Vass therefore concludes that explanatory critique constitutes an insufficient basis for EN, and thus, for a Critical Realist theory of ethics, and suggests that an ethical theory modelled on Habermas' discourse ethics provides a more promising basis for such an undertaking (2010).[4]

As my primary aim in this article is to put explanatory critique to practical use, in the sense that Elder-Vass has characterized as a 'straightforward' critique of ideology (2017), I am not overly concerned with the possibility of a 'strong' EN, or the existence of universal and timeless moral truths. I will, however, remain faithful to Bhaskar's project in as far as I

will identify a 'false belief' – namely what I will discuss as the self-and other-objectification inherent in narcissism generally and the moral narcissism of grandstanders specifically – and trace it to its causal source, which I identify as the neoliberal variety of commodity fetishism. I will align myself with Sayer's suggestion of a 'qualified EN' in so far as my use of explanatory critique seeks to move beyond a mere comparison of one subjective ethical position with another (e.g. whether or not the suppression of 'free speech' in some cases is a good thing). Rather, I aim to preserve the Critical Realist challenge to moral relativism in a similar way as Sayer, by asserting that humans, as embodied social beings capable of flourishing and suffering, are subject to evaluative judgments that are circumscribed and necessitated by their nature (Sayer 2011). This includes their nature as social beings who depend on others not only for material survival, but also for the conditions of possibility of forming the kind of cognitive structure that enables the emergence of a flourishing consciousness. While evaluative judgments can therefore vary substantially, they are not entirely arbitrary or relative, and are subject to a certain inertia both on an individual and a social level. This kind of 'qualified EN' thus opens up a space for a 'mid-range' form of explanatory critique that can identify some things as objectively more amenable to human flourishing than others. In this sense, my argument here will be that while there may not be an ultimate, transcendental reason not to objectify human beings, a situated ethical naturalist view of humans as interdependent embodied subjects nevertheless implies that doing so is both morally and factually wrong.

While I thus accept Elder-Vass critique of Bhaskar, I depart from him (and others, e.g. Porpora 2019; Vandenberghe 2019) when it comes to the question of what ethical theory is best suited to moving the project of a Critical Realist ethics forward. I also depart (albeit in a more complicated way) from Alan Norrie, who, whilst not proposing to import a particular theory of ethics into Critical Realism, works towards a Critical Realist ethics from the perspective of legal theory and psychoanalysis (Norrie 2016, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2021). It would substantially exceed the scope of this paper to discuss my differences with Norrie in detail, but the four corners of our disagreements could be defined as: (a) his use of a very traditional Freudianism, including drive theory and the idea of 'primary narcissism' (discussed below); (b) his development of the concept of 'love' in a Freudian sense as the sublimation of 'animal level' sexual love, which I believe to be flawed in its original conception by Freud; (c) his main psychoanalytic sources (Loewald and Lear), whose interpretation of narcissism fundamentally differs from my own psychoanalytic sources Kohut, Winnicott and Fairbairn; and (d) the religious impetus of his argument and his commitment to the theory of Metareality. As interesting as it would be to discuss these points, for reasons of scope I will therefore here limit my critique to Elder-Vass explicit suggestion of Habermas as the Frankfurt School scholar best suited to informing a Critical Realist ethics. Both the discourse ethics Elder-Vass has in mind, and the Bourdieusian version of embodied virtue ethics Sayer proposes, have certain drawbacks – the former remains on a relatively high level of social structure that neglects the biological groundedness of ethics, and the latter, as all virtue-theoretical approaches, it tends to focus on a reified notions of 'values' or 'virtues' as the objects of ethical theory, as opposed to the interconnected subjectivity of ethical actors. In order to critique the specific distortions of morality under neoliberal commodity fetishism, it is however necessary to focus neither on merely the level of (moral) discourse, nor the constitution or 'character' of individual actors, but rather, on the quality of ethical

relationships in a given society. In the next section, I will therefore propose that Axel Honneth's interpretation of Hegel's theory of ethical life[5] is a more suitable candidate for my purposes here.

4. 'Qualified ethical naturalism' and Honneth's theory of recognition

Honneth's ethics (1996, 2004, 2014) draws on two main influences: the young Hegel and Object Relations Psychoanalysis. From Hegel, Honneth takes an idea of ethical life that locates the ethical not in a person's character or actions, but the quality of their relationship with the other and with society at large. From social psychology and psychoanalysis – which he accesses through Mead and Winnicott respectively – he takes the specific mechanisms of this relating, which he refers to as processes of recognition. The concept of recognition (German: *Anerkennung*) is sometimes unduly reduced to something like 'respect' or, in current parlance, a 'mindfulness' of the other.[6] In its original formulation however, 'respect', understood as the acknowledgment of a particular individual or collective identity, is at most one moment in a complex and multi-scalar process. Hegel's ethics is based on the idea of a dialectic mediation of the contradiction between self and other, but it also entails a mediation between two moments within the subject, i.e. between the self in its abstract universality, and in its concrete determinacy (Goldstein 2005). Recognition thus means, first and foremost, the subject's ability to see his own particularity reflected in another particular subject, by virtue of the fact that both of them are also instants of the same abstract, universal subjecthood. Where this basic form of recognition fails – for example because I regard the other not as a subject but rather, a mere object – any 'higher level' forms of acknowledgment, such as respect, care or solidarity, are thus precluded. For Hegel, recognition of one another as subjects is therefore the nucleus of what he calls 'absolute ethical life': the integration of society 'from the ground up' through a process of overcoming contradiction,[7] one subject/subject pair at a time.

In order to bring this idea into the realm of social theory, Honneth turns to the Object Relations interpretation of psychoanalysis. Drawing on Mead and Winnicott, he argues that the development of the actual embodied self relies on a sequence of instantiations of recognition of the growing infant as an autonomous, determinate subject. Object relations psychoanalysis departs with the classic Freudian view of development as the unfolding of innate drives, and instead focuses on the specific quality of self-other relationships that are internalized in the course of maturation. The basis of psychic development is thus laid in the infant's earliest relationships with their caregivers, who can be experienced either in a supportive, nourishing, or in a hostile, rejecting way, depending on their response to the infant's articulation of his or her needs. In an optimal trajectory, the infant gradually comes to experience the caregiver as an independent entity with their own will, and in this way, grows to perceive of themselves as just such a being – a subject-subject relationship is established. In a less ideal situation, where there is for example neglect or any form of violence towards the infant – what Honneth refers to as forms of 'misrecognition' – this process of integration is disturbed, and the emerging consciousness of the infant remains impaired. Moreover, this process occurs at different stages of development, so that early care for immediate physical and emotional needs of an infant ('love') is later followed by more mature forms of recognition such as 'respect' and 'solidarity' (Honneth 1996).

Honneth's social theory then soon turns to these 'higher order' phenomena of (mis)re-cognition, which, he asserts, underlie most forms of social conflict. However, for my purposes here, I am more interested in his initial reading of recognition as a prerequisite for the development of psychic structure based on the fundamental affordances of embodiment. As discussed in the previous section, while I do not disagree with Elder-Vass on the failure of Bhaskar's explanatory critique to justify a 'strong' EN, I am not convinced that a Habermasian discursive approach is the ideal alternative. Its focus on relatively 'high-level' forms of language-based interaction leaves open the question of how embodied human beings develop to a point where they can engage in such discursive processes in the first place. Indeed, Honneth himself has been taken to task for a similar linguistic bias, for example by Gerard Deranty, who accuses Honneth of dwelling too briefly on the natural-biological basics of moral development before moving on to the social (Deranty 2005; Deranty and Renault 2007). Despite this imbalance, however, Honneth's theory, more so than Habermas', provides a basis for a 'qualified EN' in as far as it regards humans as embodied beings with shared propensities for flourishing and suffering, from which derives the very possibility of recognition, and thus, ethics. At the same time, the theory of recognition also avoids the pitfalls of virtue-theoretical approaches that more or less implicitly invite a reading of morality as the individual accumulation of reified virtues, which – as the 'ethical capital' literature demonstrates – does little to prevent the kind of objectification inherent in neoliberal ethics.

In this context, however, another criticism of Honneth's theory bears mentioning: as Richard Ganis (2015) observes, Honneth has a 'tendency to see overt physical abuse and negligence as the salient moral injuries' (330), while neglecting the more subtle, psychological forms of misrecognition that psychoanalysts regularly encounter in their praxis. Ganis specifically refers to narcissistic injury as such an example – an 'invisible' kind of emotional harm, where caregivers fail to acknowledge the individual selfhood of the child, despite overtly providing sufficient care. This kind of psychic injury leads to specific cognitive distortions in the emerging self, in extreme cases resulting in narcissistic or borderline personality disorders. Ganis' observation is relevant here because it highlights an aspect of misrecognition that goes somewhat underexplored in Honneth's work, but is of great importance for understanding the phenomenon of moral grandstanding – the nature of misrecognition as not just involving overt violence or neglect, but rather, a fundamental failure to acknowledge the other as a subject, in other words, objectification. Hegel himself gives an account of this process in his famous master/bondsman passage, as he tells the story of two selves who encounter each other, neither initially sure of whether the other exists independently of him. The only way for them to determine this is a struggle to the death, where each aims to prove that he is not afraid of dying, and thus, not a (dependent) object, but rather, an (independent) subject. One subsequently subdues the other and becomes the master, while the other becomes the bondsman, compelled to serve. However, as Hegel emphasizes, in thus reducing the bondsman to a mere object, the master has also lost something valuable, namely the possibility to be himself recognized as a subject by someone qualified to do so, i.e. another subject (Hegel [1807] 1977).

This basic dynamic underlies narcissistic injury – one party to the exchange, in a developmental situation the child, is treated like a mere extension of another's self, destined to serve the other's needs rather than have their own met. 'In other words, in whatever guise,

misrecognition is a moral injury to an other who has been treated instrumentally, in the manner of a mere insensate object' (Ganis 2015, 344). The child is thus unable to experience their own emerging subjecthood, but equally, they are rendered incapable of extending recognition to anyone else. Ganis' intervention thus matters for a Critical Realist theory of ethics not only because it extends Honneth's concept of misrecognition to include non-overt forms of harm to the developing psyche, but also because it identifies the cause of social conflict not only as early experiences of violence or neglect, but as something rather more subtle: the experience of objectification, and later, the extension of this objectification to others. As I will discuss in the next section, this distortion not only prevents the emergence of flourishing individual selves, but – by 'feeding into' the totality of dynamic interactions that constitute sociality – is inimical to the emergence of genuine ethical life under neoliberal capitalism.

5. Narcissism and the cycle of misrecognition

A well-established line of argument in the social sciences diagnoses the transition from a traditional, community based society to a highly individualized consumer society characterized by risk and uncertainty as the cause of emerging forms of subjectivity focused on the individual self (e.g. Giddens 1991; Sennett 1998; Bourdieu 1998; Chomsky 1999; Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Gorz 1999; Putnam 2001; Baudrillard 1998; Bauman 2007). The gist of these accounts is that the dissolution of old forms of identity gives rise to a new character type, less interested in communitarian engagement and connection, and instead retreating into individual projects of 'psychic and bodily improvement' (Giddens 1991, 171). While only some of the writings in this vein make explicit reference to 'narcissism' (e.g. Lasch 1977, 1979), there is overall a marked tendency to interpret the Western culture of individualism and consumerism as promoting a character structure resembling narcissistic pathology.

However, in terms of an analysis of neoliberal ethics in general, and contemporary moral grandstanding specifically, there are two problems with this interpretation. On the one hand, the diagnosis of the dissolution of traditional social structures usually takes a conservative-leaning tone of sentimental backwards looking, as if these structures had not inherently depended on the violent oppression of women, Black people and people of colour, LGBT people, and many other groups. Accordingly, some authors resort to a strongly moralistic tone when describing the resulting efforts of individuals to fashion selves appropriate for the new world:

> expertly manipulated by the marketing and advertising industry … idealized images of the self are now presented vicariously through the lives of the rich and famous. These self-obsessed hedonistic lifestyles, once out of reach, have now materialized to some degree through increases in income, the falling costs of consumer products and services, and the growth and growing acceptance of cosmetic surgery. (McDonald, Wearing, and Ponting 2007, 496)

Such admonishments of individual 'self-obsession' fail to recognize, however, that strivings for self-improvement under neoliberalism are not simply a result of an innate selfishness previously held in check by traditional social structures – rather, they stem from a convergence of a necessary increase in consumption associated with economic growth,

and equally increasing individual competition in the market for entrepreneurial selves. Neoliberal *homo œconomicus* must learn to internalize the contradiction between capital and labour to such an extent that he becomes his own workforce as much as his own commodity and his own profiteer – this certainly involves the construction of an identity that 'is characterized by the objectification and commodification of one's body and personality' (McDonald, Wearing, and Ponting 2007, 491), but whether this is correctly described as 'hedonism' remains doubtful.

On the other hand, superficial appreciations of narcissism as merely 'excessive self-regard' fall short of explaining why psychoanalysis views narcissism, at least in its more extreme versions, as a psychopathology. Freud originally distinguished between 'primary narcissism', i.e. the original state of symbiosis between an infant and parent, and 'secondary narcissism' as a libidinal investment in the ego which he viewed as always pathological (Ganis 2015). Otto Kernberg subsequently described its observable features, including 'excessive self-absorption, intense ambition, grandiosity, and an inordinate need for tribute from others' (Akhtar 1989, 508; see also Holmes 2001). Unlike Freud, however, he saw as the core of narcissism a denial of dependency, caused by childhood experiences of a chronically unreliable other. The infant thus cannot experience himself as a subject due to lack of mirroring, and resolves this situation by resorting to a delusional merger with the other ('I have everything you could possibly give me already within myself'), resulting in a pervasive denial of vulnerability that could give the other power over the self. This denial of vulnerability, for Kernberg, is at the core of narcissistic grandiosity – just like Hegel's 'master', the narcissist thus ultimately aims to prove that he does not depend on anyone or anything outside of himself to exist.[8]

Like Kernberg, Heinz Kohut believed narcissistic pathology to be caused by early needs for mirroring going unmet, resulting in the emergent self 'vacillat[ing] between an irrational overestimation of the self and feelings of inferiority.' (Kohut 2011, 438). In order to ward off this inferiority, narcissists thus constantly require what they did not adequately receive in childhood: mirroring of their grandiose self through another person, in Kohut's terminology, a 'self-object': 'pathological narcissism is thus characterized by a sense that one is entitled to utilize the other instrumentally to manage affect and shore up primitive grandiosity and self-esteem, which are readily destabilized by actual or perceived assaults from the environment' (Ganis 2015, 334). This objectification of the other is thus the second moment of narcissistic misrecognition – the self, who has previously been deprived of an opportunity to experience himself as subject, now extends the same treatment to others.[9] Donald Winnicott (2018) finally adds that shame about his own denied inferiority compels the narcissist to construct a grandiose 'false self', which he operates in the world, roughly comparable to an avatar in a video game. This false self needs constant affirmation from others, lest it collapses and throws the narcissist back onto their dreaded, inferior 'true self'. Extracting such affirmation, or 'narcissistic supply' (Kernberg 1985, 273), from others in the shape of attention, admiration or unconditional support thus becomes the main preoccupation of the narcissist, and the functional reason for his perceived interpersonal exploitativeness.

From this perspective, narcissism is thus much more than mere vanity or excessive self-regard – rather, it entails quite the opposite, an excessively low regard of oneself caused by early experiences of misrecognition. Some theorists (e.g. Morrison 1983, 2014) have consequently argued that at the core of narcissistic pathology are experiences of

shame, caused by negative caregiver reactions to the needs of the developing infant. These 'shameful' parts – vulnerability and dependency needs, but also inadequacy, weakness and inferiority more generally – are thus projected onto devalued others, in order to defend the narcissist's fragile self. Despite their aversion to dependency, narcissists thus depend on others both as idealized 'self-objects' whose purpose is to mirror the grandiose false self, and as devalued vessels for shame and inferiority that allow the narcissist to remain in delusional omnipotence. Both these scenarios are characterized by what Martha Nussbaum (1995) and others (Dworkin 1974; MacKinnon 1987) have called 'objectification', the act of 'treating a "someone" as a "something"' (Nussbaum 1995, 251). Objectification, according to Nussbaum, has several dimensions, among them instrumentality; denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership and the denial of subjectivity (257). Narcissistic pathology involves all of these dimensions to an extent, but chiefly rests on instrumentality and the denial of subjectivity. One could therefore here speak of a 'cycle of misrecognition', where the early denial of a person's subjecthood leads them to objectify others as mirrors of the self, but also of themselves, as exemplified in the construction of a 'false self' who is not a 'someone' so much as a 'something': a tool the narcissist uses to extract supply from his environment.

6. Neoliberalism, commodity fetishism and the false self

Reading narcissism as characterized by self- and other objectification, rather than merely excessive self-regard or consumerism, thus opens up a reading of neoliberal ethics as the systematic production of a cycle of misrecognition. On the one hand, the neoliberal exhortation to fashion a character fit to seek its own advantage in extracting material and financial assets from other market participants is structurally indistinguishable from the construction of a 'false self' for the extraction of narcissistic supply. On the other hand, as e.g. Layton (2014) argues, increasing income inequality and the resulting parental anxieties about the fate of their offspring has led to a specific contemporary type of objectification, wherein children become 'projects' or investments for their parents, or alternatively, carriers for their own unrealized aspirations. Importantly, this type of misrecognition does not necessarily involve violence or neglect as in Honneth's account, and neither does it stem from the caregiver's own individual psychopathology, but rather, from a genuine wish to equip one's descendants with the capacities to survive in an increasingly brutal market environment. However, the effect is that the developing child's own subjectivity is misrecognized, as they are induced into the development of a marketable 'false self'.

However, while neoliberalism accounts for the self-objectifying impulse plaguing *homo œconomicus* and the resulting cycle of misrecognition, the other-objectifying moment of this mindset also has deeper roots in the mechanisms of commodity fetishism itself. Like 'narcissism', 'commodity fetishism' is an often misused term. To once again cite McDonald, Wearing, and Ponting (2007): 'the importance placed upon the acquisition and consumption of commodities has resulted in fetishism (Marx 1876), recently conceptualized as "over consumption", "luxury fever" and "affluenza"' (495). While these phenomena may well exist, however, they are categorically not what the 'fetishism of commodities' refers to in Marx. Michael Heinrich (2012) points out that Marx speaks of the 'secret' of

commodity fetishism, and there certainly is no 'secret' to simply overvaluing consumption. Rather, Marx refers to

> the mysterious character of the commodity-form [which] consists therefore simply in the fact, that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties [*gesellschaftliche Natureigenschaften*] of these things. (Capital, 1:164–65 cited in Heinrich 2012)

The 'secret' thus is that under commodity fetishism, relations between humans appear as relations between things – relations between subjects are habitually and automatically misrecognized as relations between objects and vice versa. Moreover, this inversion is not merely a case of 'false consciousness', in the sense that the error could simply be recognized and corrected – the fetishistic inversion of the relationship between people and things is a necessary consequence of capitalist relations of production, and thus cannot simply be overcome by an act of will:

> under the conditions of commodity production, producers do not relate to one another in a direct, social way; they first enter into a relationship with one another during the act of exchange—through the products of their labour. That their social relationship to one another appears as a social relationship between things is therefore not at all an illusion. (2012, 73)

In as far as neoliberalism demands that everyone *become* the very commodity they are taking to market, this inverted relationship therefore applies not only to coats and yards of linen, but also to the commoditized 'false selves' taken to market by their entrepreneurs.[10]

Commodity fetishism thus produces a narcissistic mindset not only in terms of fashioning oneself into a 'brand', or conspicuous consumption, but more fundamentally, through the inversion of subject and object that constitutes the 'fetishism' part. Anselm Jappe observes that

> narcissism consists in a devaluation of the world outside the subject: all objects are nothing but *projections of the subje*ct and do not have a reality of their own, an autonomy to be respected … for the narcissist, the world of non-I loses its autonomous reality; for the fetishist logic of the commodity, the world outside the accumulation of abstract unity of work is only a shadow. (Jappe 2020, 172, emphasis mine)

This is not merely an analogy: commodity fetishism enforces a narcissistic mindset through the necessary self-objectification inherent in becoming the very commodity one sells ('human capital') and the simultaneous objectification of others as entrepreneurs of their equally objectified selves, with whom one is trapped in a market characterized by the pervasive competition of all against all. Moreover, as Jappe elaborates, just as commodity fetishism rests on a general equivalent that makes all commodities comparable and interchangeable, self-commodification requires some kind of assumed general standard of value, i.e. it must be possible to establish whether one's self is worth more or less than that of others. Just as with economic value, this presumed commensurability necessarily results in comparisons: if some are 'worth' more than others, and the market is the final arbiter of who, then establishing one's 'objective' value relative to others becomes prime objective. This belief in universal commensurability, which is the very core of commodity fetishism, also underlies the narcissist's obsession with superiority: they must not

only be better than others in a particular area of skill or knowledge, but 'objectively' superior in every aspect of their being, and this superiority must constantly be reaffirmed.

It is not difficult to see, therefore, how neoliberal commodity fetishism produces a kind of 'necessary narcissistic mindset', characterized by structural mechanisms that produce a pervasive social 'cycle of misrecognition'.[11] These consist, on the one hand, in the necessity to commoditise one's own self down to one's deepest affective and cognitive components, and on the other, in the fact that the neoliberal marketplace is a community of objectified 'brands' or commodity-avatars, who interact with each other for strictly instrumental reasons. In this context, moral grandstanding – and in a wider sense, the 'selling' of one's moral character in any market arena, such as social media – is thus not so much an aberration within moral discourse, as Tosi and Warmke suggest, but rather, it is what remains of moral discourse when ethics becomes fully subordinated to the market. The successful grandstander thus not only flaunts their moral superiority in order to gain social status or dominance, but specifically, to prove the superior social market value of their 'brand'. Not doing so – or not following demands to mirror the grandstanding gesture of 'high value' others – may jeopardize their own possibility for market participation, and thus ultimately, their material survival. Nowhere does this become more obvious than in instances where an initial act of grandstanding is mirrored and escalated by an audience to the extent that a real or perceived misdeed results in a market participant being removed not just from the discursive arena but the actual marketplace through lobbying for their dismissal from employment or boycott of their business. The mirroring and escalation – in Tosi and Warmke's terminology 'piling on' and 'ramping up' (2002b, 78) – have been compared to the dynamics of ancient witch hunts, but in the neoliberal marketplace, the aim is not to destroy the physical existence of the morally inferior, but their economic existence. Those partaking in public spectacles of moral superiority enhance their own subjective sense of moral value, but they also increase their 'ethical capital' and thus the market value of their own personal brand. Neoliberalism has thus not just privatized ethics, but turned it into a fully automated public spectacle following the all-pervasive rules of capital accumulation.

7. Conclusion

In the sense of a qualified explanatory critique, the social mass production of 'false selves' under neoliberalism can thus be seen as the production of a related pair of necessary false beliefs: one, a belief in the basic *commensurability* of human worth according to some general standard of social market value; and two, in a resulting *hierarchy* of relative value between individuals. It thus redoubles, on a social level, the necessary false belief – perhaps one could say, false ontology – inherent in commodity fetishism more generally, namely the mistaking of a relationship between subjects as one between objects. To reiterate, this false belief is not merely an error or form of 'false consciousness' that could be overcome through mere insight – rather, it is a collective embodied practice that can only be overcome, if at all, through a radically different collective praxis. In the absence thereof, the totalizing reach of the market has progressed to a point where even aspects of human sociality previously believed to be beyond the logic of capital become subsumed under it, including a person's ethical capabilities or moral character. Moral grandstanding, then, can be seen as a way of demonstrating that one has

internalized this false belief and is ready to act accordingly, by accumulating and flaunting 'ethical capital' in the arena of public moral discourse. This does not mean that any and all public moral utterances constitute grandstanding – as Tosi and Warmke outline, grandstanding involves specific features that identify it not merely as a form of moral talk, but a self-promotion strategy. Primarily, this consists in displaying moral superiority while devaluing others, in the extraction of narcissistic supply in the form of approval or admiration, and in a sense of entitlement to treat others as objects, either mirroring one's grandiose false self, or reflecting one's disowned inferiority.

The similarity of this behaviour to the hallmark traits of narcissistic pathology is not coincidental. The double inversion of the relationship between human beings and things under neoliberal commodity fetishism produces a 'necessary narcissistic mindset' that inverts the relation between ethics and market interaction, by subordinating the former to the latter. Moral grandstanding, as initially discussed, is a practical expression of this condition: next to the overtly narcissistic dimensions above, it also involves the splitting of the self in an idealized, morally 'good' part and a devalued 'evil' part that is projected onto someone else. It thus also involves the self- and other objectification that characterizes narcissistic pathology, be it in the form of using admiring others to enhance one's social status, or by constructing a morally inferior other for the purpose of making oneself look better by comparison. The creation of a moral character for public consumption is thus structurally similar to that of a 'false self' – both require a split in the self, where one part becomes the raw material to be fashioned into a commodity, while the other 'entrepreneurial' part markets this false self in the public sphere. This becomes most obvious on social media as the ideal arena to present and promote one's 'personal brand', but its effects reach deep into the productive and reproductive spheres. From this point of view, it is thus perhaps not surprising that discussions of the ethics of neoliberalism (and in many ways, of ethics as such in recent years) can only conceive of the ethical as some kind of individual vanity project.

The temporary correspondence of the emergence of neoliberal capitalism and the often-cited 'resurgence of virtue ethics' (e.g. Annas 2006; Barber 1998; Grimi 2019) may be a case in point: while it would certainly be wrong to accuse the ancient philosophers of virtue of promoting narcissism (although Hegel, in essence, does just that, see Goldstein 2005), interpretations of virtue ethics since Foucault tend heavily towards an affirmation of the ethical as the atomistic 'self-fashioning' of an ethical character, culminating in the theory of 'ethical capital' which poignantly summarizes what this fetishistic, marketized view of ethics is all about. While commodity fetishism thus provides the basis for this self-objectification by making intersubjective recognition impossible except via the proxy of commodities, neoliberalism has more recently dissolved the traditional bonds of solidarity based in shared class interests, and reduced the social to all-pervasive individual competition. In this context, the self becomes flexible and shifting depending on market demands, and thus constantly has to be reinvented and improved upon. The core aspect of this competition – apart from hostility – is the delusion of commensurability: just as commodities become comparable due to the specific quantities of value they contain, so commodified selves must be assumed to contain commensurable but unequal quantities of worth. In this context, moral grandstanding serves not just to prove oneself morally worthy, but *worthier than* others – it is thus inherently dependent on the idea of a hierarchy of human value, translated into market dominance.

To be clear, in calling moral grandstanding narcissistic, I am not implying that everyone who grandstands is mentally ill. Most theorists of narcissism agree that there is a spectrum from subclinical, relatively healthy narcissistic personalities, to the severely disordered who struggle to function in everyday life. At the same time, as some of the authors cited above discuss, narcissism has also become so socially normative over recent decades that in the process of putting together the fifth and latest iteration of the DSM[12] (e.g. Cheek et al. 2018), the American Psychiatric Association debated for some time whether to even still include it as a specific disorder. Rather, my point is that since commodity fetishism inclines the personality towards the development of a narcissistic structure, and neoliberalism accelerates this tendency by demanding the objectification and commoditisation of all parts of the self, we are all to an extent compelled to think and act like narcissists. Some certainly are better equipped to do so, especially when respective events in their personal developmental history habituate them to an objectified existence early in life. But, as the phenomena of contemporary moral grandstanding and public shaming show, even those who have not internalized this kind of thinking early in life are sooner or later forced to consider constructing a market-compliant false self, or suffer the consequences. Whether they find themselves at the receiving end of a pile-on, or more or less gently pressured to make a public statement for or against a particular moral position, they cannot afford to ignore current trends in public opinion, or the positions of the most successful grandstanders that influence them.

For the Critical Realist, this raises the question of *how* commodity fetishism, as an objective social structure, impacts individuals in such a way as to incline them towards a narcissistic personality – in other words, what concrete powers and mechanisms are at work here, and how do they operate? Psychoanalysis gives us some important clues in this regard, by pointing to the nuclear family as the main site of the intergenerational transmission of culturally shaped psychic content, including the narcissistic dynamics discussed above. For precisely this reason, the nuclear family has long been regarded as essential for the functioning of capitalism, both in terms of the material division of labour, and of the inoculation of every new generation with the ideology of the market (see Engels 1972/1884). At the same time, however, families – the traditional heterosexual variety or any other – are not the closed systems psychoanalytic approaches since Freud tend to treat them as. They are themselves tied into, and interact with, larger social contexts: for example, regardless of how a parent or parents position themselves with regard to traditional gender roles, the fact that wide parts of society still materially treat parents as 'mothers' and 'fathers' according to traditional sex role stereotypes, will impact how these parents can fulfil their familial role. In this sense, the traditional view of parental roles works as what Dave Elder-Vass calls a 'norm circle', namely a 'group of people that is committed to endorsing and enforcing a particular norm … [that] can exercise an emergent causal power to increase the tendency of individuals to conform to the norm that it endorses' (2010, 99). Regardless of their own views on gender roles, parents are therefore tied into norm circles reinforcing traditional sex role stereotypes – not, as in Freud's ahistorical and Eurocentric view, because these are some natural derivate of sexed bodies, but because dominant gender norms act as external causal mechanisms impacting the structure of the nuclear family as the main site of enculturation.

In the same sense, I would argue that a purely psychoanalytic approach that overemphasises the causal role of the dynamics of a supposedly closed parent/child dyad

falls short of identifying the causal force of culture in this process. The capitalist market-place produces its own norm circles, as the division of labour produces various professional communities with their own forms of habitus and social capital, as well as their own explicit and implicit moral rules. Moreover, these communities also constitute real and actual social networks, mediating access to material resources and social power. Just as few parents can escape the causal impact of traditional gender stereotypes, so market participants have little choice but to make themselves recognizable as members of the moral community they wish to enter into economic transactions with. Professional communities therefore act as causal mechanisms in the sense of norm circles, mediating between the structural level of commodity fetishism and the individual level of performing a 'personal brand' by determining who belongs to a moral community of 'safe' economic actors (or, as the grandiloquent phrase goes, 'the right side of history'). They are therefore an important mediating factor in engendering the kind of strategic moral performance grandstanding entails, however, they are not its ultimate cause: they merely reflect the fact that in times of ubiquitous precarity and the increasing obsolescence of human labour, participation in the marketplace is transforming from an obligation into a privilege. Professional moral communities therefore act as moral filters assigning deservingness and undeservingness (i.e. ethical capital) to market actors, with social media their most visible, but by far not the only, arena. Where market participation becomes a matter of deservingness, the pressure to strategically perform not only that one is deserving, but that one is *more deserving than others*, thus becomes very difficult to resist.

The responsible management of one's personal brand, including its moral assets, thus makes moral narcissism, and its practical manifestation moral grandstanding, inevitable (albeit not unavoidable). At the same time, it has become somewhat fashionable in public discourse to accuse others of being narcissists, from the recent US president down to one's overbearing boss or parent, one's ex-partner or sibling. Just when cut-throat competition demands an ever more fervent commitment to self-marketing, 'the Narcissist' (capital N) has thus also become something of a folk devil du jour, perhaps expressing our collective discomfort with the psychologically crippling impositions of commodity fetishism. One could say, perhaps, that the identification of 'Narcissists' behind every corner is itself a form of moral grandstanding, as the arguably ethically unsavoury social strategies of competitive self-entrepreneurs are projected on a supposedly even worse breed of genuinely delusional egomaniacs. However, while I do not contest that such persons exist, the majority of public moral grandstanders are not at all delusional. Rather, they have a keen awareness of the rules of the market and a strategy to advance in it, be it through increasing their own moral reputation, or by damaging someone else's. Group phenomena like 'piling on' then become a way for others to partake in the successful grandstanders glory, to blow off steam, and to combat anxiety about their own market success. Getting someone else fired for being on the 'wrong side of history' can effectively calm fears of unemployment and economic ruin, as long as one stays on the right one.

But even in its less aggressive forms, moral grandstanding perverts the meaning of ethics, by not selling what is ethical, but strategically positioning as ethical that which sells. The purpose of ethics is thus perverted, as it becomes merely a competitive strategy for individual economic survival. As every other aspect of life under neoliberalism, moral

sentiment thus also becomes subject to risk – the calculating, entrepreneurial self has to weigh what moral position to take in public in order to get ahead, and what positions to keep well to themselves in order not to derail their economic trajectory. This is, in a sense, what Tosi and Warmke mean when they accuse grandstanding of being detrimental to freedom of speech, which it certainly is, but that is not the worst of it: moral grandstanding is also detrimental to the very concept of ethics as such. If one accepts the definition of ethics as intersubjective recognition that I have presented, then this is so simply because the interpersonal objectification inherent in market behaviour renders ethical life, in Hegel's/Honneth's definition thereof, impossible. But even if one disagrees with this theory of ethics, moral grandstanding is anti-ethical in as far as it subordinates ethics to the market, and puts strategic considerations before genuinely ethical ones. In the spirit of a 'qualified explanatory critique', both interpretation shows moral grandstanding to involve a false belief: in the first case, about the nature of ethical life as a relation between embodied subjects (as opposed to their objectified market selves), and in the second, about the purpose of ethics as ideas about how one should live (as opposed to strategic positions designed to signal market value). Whichever position Critical Realists are more inclined to agree with, they should thus be wary of any moral theory or practice that promotes an objectified and objectifying view or ethics, including but not limited to moral grandstanding and its associated phenomena.

Notes

1. See below for disambiguation.
2. To reiterate: while moral grandstanding and 'cancel culture' are related phenomena, they are not synonymous. Specifically, not any instance of voicing a grievance online, individually or collectively, amounts to grandstanding, and not any and all actors who have been accused of promoting 'cancel culture' are grandstanders. For example, the women who accused the film producer Harvey Weinstein of sexual misconduct und the hashtag #metoo in 2017 and were later vindicated in a court of law were hardly grandstanding, although some of their 'allies' may well have been. The intention of this paper is not to denounce any and all expressions of interpersonal discontent online, but rather, to point out how the collective dynamics emerging from such expressions can and do facilitate the kind of bandwagon-riding that constitutes grandstanding in the sense described by Tosi&Warmke, among others.
3. One of the best-known examples of this is the case of Justine Sacco, a communications professional, who in 2013 posted an ill-considered tweet about AIDS immediately before boarding a long-haul flight to South Africa. By the time she landed, her tweet had been shared tens of thousands of times, and she found herself out of a job. See https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/15/magazine/how-one-stupid-tweet-ruined-justine-saccos-life.html (accessed June 2022).
4. Leigh Price (2018), on the other hand, disagrees with this interpretation, since in her view, Elder-Vass overstates the degree to which Bhaskar believed in moral values having universal and timeless ontological validity.
5. It should be noted that while Honneth frames his theory as diverging from Habermas' more Kantian approach, his theory does have Kantian elements. However, my objection to discourse ethics as a basis for Critical Realist ethics is the lack of consideration of pre-linguistic embodiment, which Honneth gives explicit consideration to.
6. In the English speaking world, this is in part due to its reception through Charles Taylor, who wants to turn the theory of recognition into a vehicle for identity politics, oblivious to Hegel's dictum that 'the truth of identity is the identity of identity and nonidentity'.

7. Honneth, somewhat unfortunately, frames Hegel's 'contradiction' as 'conflict', however, that is not necessarily what 'contradiction' means. Contradiction exists between self and other by virtue of the very fact that being one excludes being the other, and vice versa, in the same sense as light 'contradicts' dark and being 'contradicts' non-being. There is no need for hostility or overt struggle in this model, although they are certainly not ruled out.

8. This connection becomes even more pronounced in the work of Donald Fairbairn (2013), who explicitly bases his interpretation of Object Relations in the Hegelian dialectic.

9. As is perhaps obvious, my own approach here leans towards an interpretation that frames narcissism in purely negative terms. It should be noted, however, that some psychoanalytic theorists have provided a more balanced interpretation, which views narcissism as an important factor in the development of mature object love (See Loewald 1989).

10. Neoliberal commodity fetishism is thus characterized by a 're-internalisation' of commodity relations – if industrial labour relations demanded the externalization (*Veraeusserlichung*) of labour power and its objectification in things that behaved like subjects, neoliberalism demands to re-internalise this relation and become a subject that behaves like an object (and at the same time, its vendor). The neoliberal market place is thus not so much a community of things facing their alienated producers, but of producers pretending to be things.

11. This does not mean that there is no sphere outside of objectified commodity relations between people – feminist authors like Roswitha Scholz (1999) have emphasized for some time the necessary split between the sphere of production and exchange and a split-off 'rest' that cannot be subsumed under this logic, but is necessary to sustain it.

12. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

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