

This essay was originally published in The Philosopher some time in 2020. It has since been lost in their content management system, and is no longer available online.

Moral Grandstanding and the Will to Power

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Public discussions about politics and morality have become unpleasant in recent years. These days this observation has become almost trite. But we've all seen people in public moral discourse who are quick to embrace extreme views, belittle those who disagree with them, and, more generally, take every opportunity to use moral talk to dominate others. Judging by how they treat public discourse, many people apparently believe that moral talk is magic. Behavior that would be considered despicable in almost any other context becomes acceptable or even laudable when the right moral terms are invoked. Any vile, rude, childish, or cruel speech becomes praiseworthy so long as it's wrapped in the cloak of moral high-mindedness.

But moral talk is not magic. Bad behavior doesn't get a pass simply because those engaging in it share your ideology, invoke the "right" values, or pay lip service to the political causes you care about. Just as some things are impermissible in real war, so too with the culture wars. Moral talk is a valuable tool for improving the world. But it's possible to use moral talk badly, and many people do so.

We don't pretend to understand what gives rise to all the ills of public discourse. But we have argued in recent empirical and philosophical work that one reason why our discussions of morality and politics are toxic is the prevalence of moral grandstanding--roughly, the use of moral talk for self-promotion. Grandstanding might seem like just a minor annoyance, but it is actually much worse. Treating public discourse as a vanity project can be the very thing that prevents us from having productive conversations about morality and politics. Grandstanding carries significant costs: it pushes us into polarized tribes, makes us cynical about moral discourse, and dilutes the signal of moral outrage. In this essay, though, we show that grandstanding is a pathetic way of using morality.

Grandstanding has two main features. First, grandstanding involves what we call a Grandstanding Expression. This is what the grandstander says or writes, and it expresses some moral claim. Someone might say "Obama is a criminal warmonger. He's obviously the worst president ever" Or, "Bush is a lying piece of war-making scum. I've been outraged every day since he stole the election." Regrettably, many people think that grandstanding is just a matter of what someone says. This is a mistake. As an analogy, take the phenomenon of lying. Someone isn't lying merely because they say something that's false. To know whether someone is a

liar, we'd have to know things about the speaker's mental state, like whether she knew her claim was false and intended to deceive her audience.

Grandstanding depends similarly on mental states. Grandstanders want to impress others and so our account needs a second part. A person must not only express a moral claim to grandstand, but also be motivated to make that claim by a desire for recognition of her moral qualities. We call this the Recognition Desire.

In some cases, someone might contribute to public discourse entirely out of a desire to impress people. But more often, the Recognition Desire is just one motivation among many. Does that mean that grandstanding practically never happens, since motivation is complicated and people rarely act exclusively on their desire for recognition? Or does it instead mean that every instance of moral talk turns out to be grandstanding, since almost everyone cares at least a little bit about impressing others? Neither of these reactions are correct. In our view, for an expression to count as grandstanding, the Recognition Desire must be fairly strong. Just how strong? This is hard to say. After all, how strong must you want others to think well of you for something you say to count as bragging? Here's a simple test that gets us in the neighborhood: the Recognition Desire must be enough that the person acting on it would feel disappointed if she found out that nobody was impressed by what she said. That reaction suggests that impressing others was a significant motivation for the expression, and that is enough to make it grandstanding.

Sometimes people with the Recognition Desire simply want others to see them as being morally decent, or as sharing the political values of their social group. To satisfy a desire like this, someone might say something like "I haven't always been perfectly respectful of the women in my life, but I would never dream of doing something as reprehensible as what Bill did." Statements like this one convey the impression of the speaker as a morally flawed person, but still a pretty good one. A lot of grandstanding is motivated by this kind of desire.

Other grandstanders are more ambitious. They aren't satisfied just to be members of the club. They want a place of prominence. To satisfy this kind of desire, a grandstander might say something like "As someone who loves his country more than most, I'm disgusted by you people opposing this war. Think of the troops before you speak." This statement not only conveys the speaker's stronger than usual commitment to his values. It also expresses disdain for those less pure than he is.

Why think that human beings use moral talk to seek recognition in these ways? By examining some core findings from social and personality psychology, we can see that it would be very surprising if people didn't grandstand. First, people show a widespread tendency to engage in self-enhancement. We generally believe that we are more competent, ambitious, intelligent, and wise than the average person, to name just a few examples. This tendency is especially strong when it comes to our moral self-assessments. We like to believe that we are not only good people, but better than others, and this fact is confirmed again and again in psychological studies. For example, in one study, 80 percent of people said they would refuse to copy exam

answers from a classmate, but that only 55 percent of their peers would refuse. Even prisoners think highly of themselves morally. In one study, inmates rated themselves as above average for every pro-social trait except law-abidingness, on which they modestly rated themselves as average. As psychologists Nadav Klein and Nicholas Epley put it, “Few biases in human judgment are easier to demonstrate than self-righteousness: the tendency to believe one is more moral than others.”

In addition to thinking well of ourselves, we want others to think we are great, too. We go to great lengths to manage others’ views about us. Psychologists call this impression management. Just to give you a sense of how important it is that others think well of us, according to one study, participants generally said that they would prefer to spend a year in jail, lose a hand, or even die before being known in their community as a criminal, Neo-Nazi, or pedophile.

Finally, studies suggest that how we think of ourselves is partly determined by how we think we compare to others. We think we are doing pretty well if we are smarter, funnier, and better looking than those around us. Not only this, but we tend to subtly adjust our beliefs and attitudes to keep up with changing conditions rather than change our perception of how we stand. For instance, it might be important to your self-conception that among your friends you’re the strongest supporter of some political candidate. So if your friends say things that make them look like extremely strong supporters, you might shift your other beliefs to stay one notch above them.

Grandstanders use morality to seek social status. According to social psychologists, there are two common ways to do this: by striving for prestige and striving for dominance. Prestige status comes from people thinking well of you for your knowledge, skills, or success. Grandstanders who strive for prestige status want, for example, a reputation for being inspiring moral exemplars. They want this reputation, not necessarily for doing anything that is actually morally heroic, but for simply typing on their keyboard or uttering certain words. They think having this prestige will result in deference from others, at least when it comes to matters of morality. Prestige grandstanders at some level think, “Look at me and admire me for my morally impressive qualities!”

But some grandstanders use moral talk for darker purposes. They grandstand to dominate others. Dominance status comes by way of instilling fear in others through intimidation, coercion, or even displays of brute force. When grandstanders strive for dominance, they use moral talk to shame or silence others and create fear. They verbally threaten and seek to humiliate. They try to impress people by derogating their rivals, an all-too-common human impulse. Instead of seeking status by gaining prestige, they seek status by taking others down a notch. Dominance grandstanders think, “Shut up and submit to my view of the world or I’ll shame and embarrass you! I’m the morally good one here!”

When people grandstand, they use moral talk in an attempt to gain social status, either by looking impressive or by dominating others. In our book, *Grandstanding: The Use and Abuse of*

Moral Talk, we argue that on every major approach to moral theory, this is bad behavior. Grandstanding has unnecessary bad consequences, it is disrespectful to other people, and virtuous people would not do it. In the rest of this essay, we want to focus on one reason good people should avoid grandstanding. This path for condemning grandstanding leads us through the thought of nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.

In developing one of the most interesting critiques of conventional morality in the history of philosophy, Nietzsche argued that modern moral practices prevent human beings from reaching their full potential. His reasons for thinking this apply in interesting ways to the phenomenon of grandstanding.

We begin with Nietzsche's idea of the will to power. Nietzsche claims that all animals, including human beings, are instinctively motivated to maximize their feelings of power—that is, the feeling you get when you overcome resistance to realizing your goals. That resistance could come from an opponent, material circumstances, or any other practical difficulty. We despise this resistance because it is frustrating, but we also need it to feel the sense of accomplishment we get upon overcoming it.

Nietzsche also holds a view of the good life for human beings that present-day moral philosophers call perfectionism. According to perfectionists, a good life is one of excellence in pursuing some objective set of goods—knowledge, deep relationships with others, the creation of works of great aesthetic value, and so on. There is no consensus about what items are on Nietzsche's list of worthwhile excellences, as his remarks on this point are characteristically cryptic, but he clearly emphasizes creativity, and frequently stresses the importance of a person "creating" herself. We need not settle this issue, though, because we are not interested primarily in Nietzsche's own view. The point is that if a person is living well, she will seek to overcome resistance as she pursues certain goals. Not just any goal will do, though. Some pursuits are unworthy of a person's time and energy. The fewer objective goods a person has in her life, the less well her life is going, even if she is satisfied with the things she pursues.

Nietzsche thinks we are not all equally good at pursuing excellence in life. Some people achieve great satisfaction in maximizing their feeling of power in attaining their goals, while others are frustrated—and sometimes greatly so. This is where the trouble starts. Rather than simply admit defeat, those who fail to exercise their will to power by achieving things that are actually worthwhile move the goalposts. They attempt to redefine what it is to live well and denigrate others' success. The result is what Nietzsche calls a "slave revolt" in morals. By that he means that the unsuccessful tell themselves that something about them is valuable as consolation for their failures. Consequently, Nietzsche thinks true human excellence is disvalued and denigrated. When a culture's sense of what is valuable shifts in response to these efforts, this leads to what Nietzsche called a "revaluation" of values. What had previously been seen as a mark of human failure becomes moral goodness. And what had previously been seen as human excellence becomes moral evil. What is crucial for our purposes is that the slave revolt involves people using morality itself to satisfy their will to power. Nietzsche thinks that our own culture

has already undergone such a revolt. Thus, our dominant moral beliefs are badly mistaken, as they are designed to shame the strong and valorize the weak.

On this overall, substantive evaluation of the state of common morality, we strongly disagree with Nietzsche. We think that some of the changes he decries—particularly the widespread recognition of all human beings as moral equals—are positive developments, and even great cultural achievements. But even though we disagree with Nietzsche about some things, we think he offers an important insight about morality in general: people frequently use morality to feel powerful, and even to exert their will over others. Indeed, this insight can help us think about grandstanding in a new light.

People often use morality—and especially moral talk—for egoistic, self-serving ends. Moral talk is not magic, but it can be a kind of trick. People use moral talk in underhanded ways to promote their own interests, just as Nietzsche would predict. We also think he is right about why people use morality this way—to raise their status, to gain some sense of satisfaction that they are achieving something in the world. The lesson we draw is not that commonsense morality is deeply mistaken, but that moral talk is often a sheepskin worn by weak or desperate wolves. They cannot get what they want through a direct act of strength—by actually achieving excellence to the degree they desire—so they find another way. They instead tell themselves that being seen as a good person is a worthwhile achievement, and then put their self-enhanced moral qualities on display. It is a cunning gambit, in a way, but it is also underhanded, and often cruel. It might make them feel powerful, but their achievement is empty. Impressing others through grandstanding is not the same as actually achieving excellence.

But why isn't getting recognition from others for having good moral qualities a goal worth pursuing? We mentioned earlier that our own empirical studies suggest that grandstanders pursue two kinds of status: prestige, or the status that comes from people thinking well of you for your knowledge, skills, or success; and dominance, the status you get by instilling fear in others through intimidation, coercion, or displays of brute force.

Let's first consider grandstanding to dominate others. Dominance grandstanding involves raising oneself up by tearing other people down. These grandstanders try to seize social power by treating morality as a weapon. That this comes so close to being exactly what Nietzsche describes as a slave revolt in morals should make clear why it cannot be part of a worthy goal. Just as the original "slave revolt" sought to use morality as a tool to dominate others, grandstanders use morality—and especially moral talk—to seize the high ground. Dominance grandstanding is a way of sacrificing others in an attempt to exercise one's will to power.

Now take grandstanding to gain prestige. This type of grandstanding often involves reassuring the in-group that you are like them, and therefore of value. A Nietzschean will wonder of these grandstanders: isn't there some other way of demonstrating your value? The rote recitation of moral terms that people approve of seems like a cheap substitute for a more worthwhile display of what makes you an interesting person worth listening to or associating with. The same is true for more ambitious forms of prestige grandstanding. If you want to demonstrate not just that

you belong, but that you are fit for a prominent role in a group, falling back on the crutch of moral talk as a way of demonstrating your value is a strategy for the weak. Real excellence is harder, but it is more rewarding, and also more honest.

From a Nietzschean perspective, grandstanding is not something an excellent person would do. Excellent people devote their time and energy to worthwhile goals—goals that are good for human beings to attain. We need not agree with Nietzsche about what those goals are. We might, for example, think that pleasure, knowledge, achievement, moral virtue, and relationships are central worthwhile human goals. Whatever they happen to be, we think that Nietzsche was right about at least this much: an excellent person will not use morality, including moral talk, as a tool to satisfy her will to power. An excellent person, therefore, would not grandstand. Excellent people have no interest in petty attempts to gain status through strategic uses of moral talk. Nietzsche would likely find grandstanding pathetic. We find it hard to disagree.