



# MORAL GRANDSTANDING (AKA VIRTUE SIGNALING)

Michael Hannon

## EXAMPLE 1

“As someone who has long fought for the poor, I find all these proposals to eliminate rent control laws disgusting. If you think these are even worth listening to, you don’t care about poverty in this country.”

## EXAMPLE 2

“I had to pull over on the way to work this morning because I saw a homeless person and I just got so upset that some people have to live that way. This happens to me several times a month.”

## MORE EXAMPLES

A person sharing a status on social media in support of an environmental cause, because they want to show others that they're a good person.

A person wearing a t-shirt showing that they donated money to some cause, because they want others to think that they're charitable.

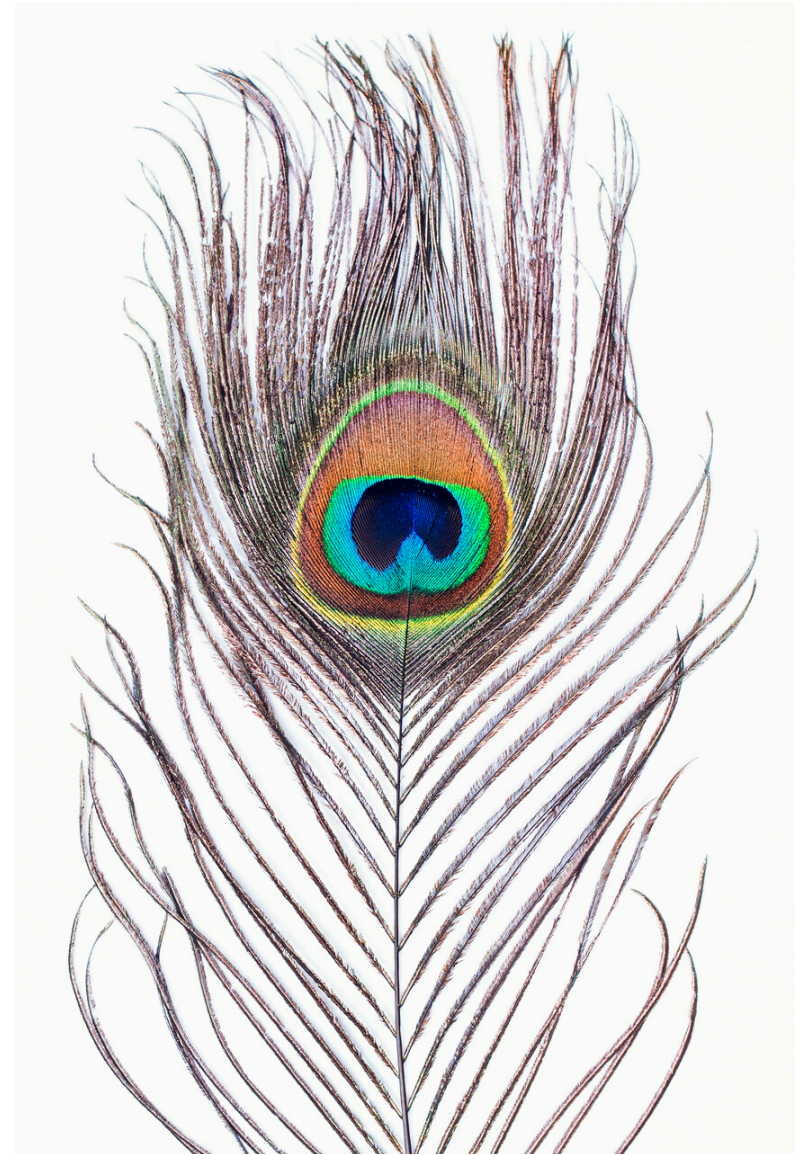
A company says they'll change an issue in their terms of service following a public controversy, because they want to improve their public image.

# WHAT IS MORAL GRANDSTANDING?

The use of moral talk for **self-promotion**.

We make ourselves look good by convincing others we are “morally respectable.”

To grandstand is to turn one’s contribution to public discourse into a vanity project.



# WHAT IS 'MORAL TALK'?

Roughly, **communication about moral matters.**

It might include any of the following:

- Talk about rights, dignity, justice, and respect.
- Talk about whether someone did something morally right or wrong.
- Talk about how morally good or bad someone is.
- Talk about what should happen to people who do good or bad.
- Talk about moral emotions: “I am outraged that she told those vile lies”.
- Talk that recommends for or against social policies.

# THE POINT OF MORAL DISCOURSE

Tosi and Warmke write,

Moral talk has a job to do. It has a point: to help us become better people, treat others with the respect they deserve, and make our world a better place.

**The primary function of moral discourse is improvement in other people's beliefs or in the world.**



# GRANDSTANDING: TWO CENTRAL FEATURES

## **Recognition Desire**

A grandstander desires that other people recognize her as morally respectable.

## **The Grandstanding Expression**

A grandstander makes a contribution to public moral discourse.

*Recognition Desire*  
+ *Grandstanding Expression*  
= *Grandstanding*

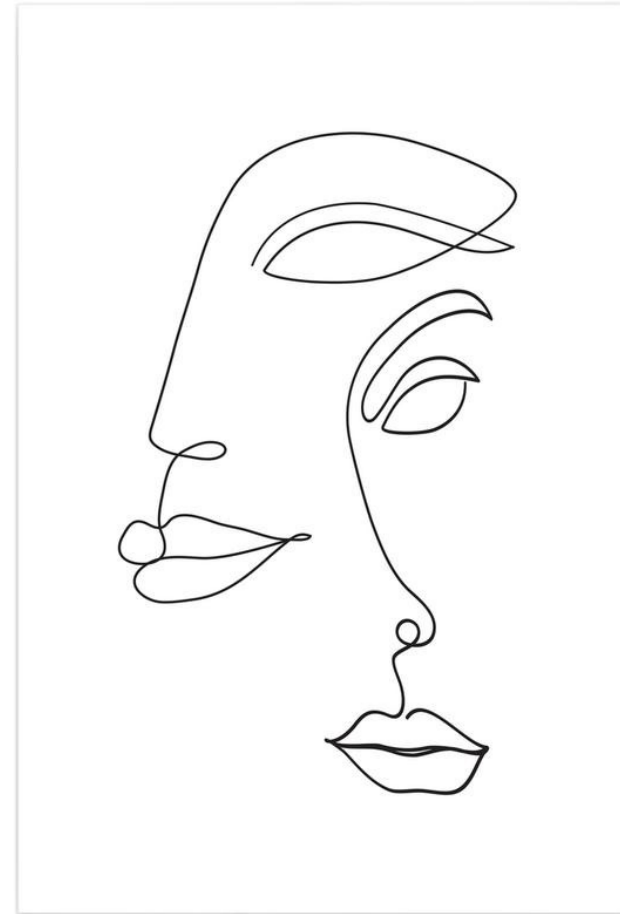


# HYPOCRISY

To accuse someone of grandstanding is to accuse them of a kind of **hypocrisy**.

*Why think this?*

They claim to be deeply concerned about some moral issue, but their main concern is with themselves.



# WHAT MOTIVATES GRANDSTANDERS?

## **Prestige**

The status that comes from people thinking well of you.

## **Dominance**

The status you get by instilling fear in others through intimidation or coercion.

# MIXED MOTIVES

Humans rarely act on the basis of a single motive.

The grandstander may want multiple things, e.g.:

- a. To impress others.
- b. To get others to take action.

To be a case of grandstanding, the recognition desire must play a significant enough motivating role.



# THE DISAPPOINTMENT TEST

If we feel **disappointed** when others do not think of us as morally respectable, then we may have been **grandstanding**.

**Is this a good test?**



# HUMBLE-BRAGGING

“Amazon won’t let me order more than three copies of my book at a time. Is there some kind of limit on best-sellers? Annoying!”

“Why does my boss always assign me to the most important clients?”

They are trying to show off.

But they also try to cloak their true intentions in unassuming language.



## DOES GRANDSTANDING WORK?

But it often seems obvious that someone is grandstanding, even if they use indirect speech.

**What is the point of using indirect speech, if it's not fooling anyone?**



# META-GRANDSTANDING

Ironically, accusing others of moral grandstanding might itself constitute moral grandstanding.

We are just 'signaling' to a different audience.

*Are Tosi and Warmke guilty of grandstanding?*



# TYPES OF GRANDSTANDING

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Piling on

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Ramping up

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Trumping up

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Strong emotions

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Claims of self-evidence



# PILING ON

When a grandstander contributes to public moral discourse to do nothing more than proclaim her **agreement with what has already been said**.

- E.g., “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.”

It is a way of being perceived favorably by others.



# KEZIAH DAUM

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**Jeremy Lam**  
@jere\_bare

My culture is NOT your goddamn prom dress.

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# #BLACKLIVESMATTER

What's the point of posting publicly in support of #BlackLivesMatter?

**BLACK  
LIVES  
MATTER**

## RAMPING UP

When grandstanders **exaggerate** their moral claims to appear more **morally sensitive** than their peers.

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 won't stand for it.

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.

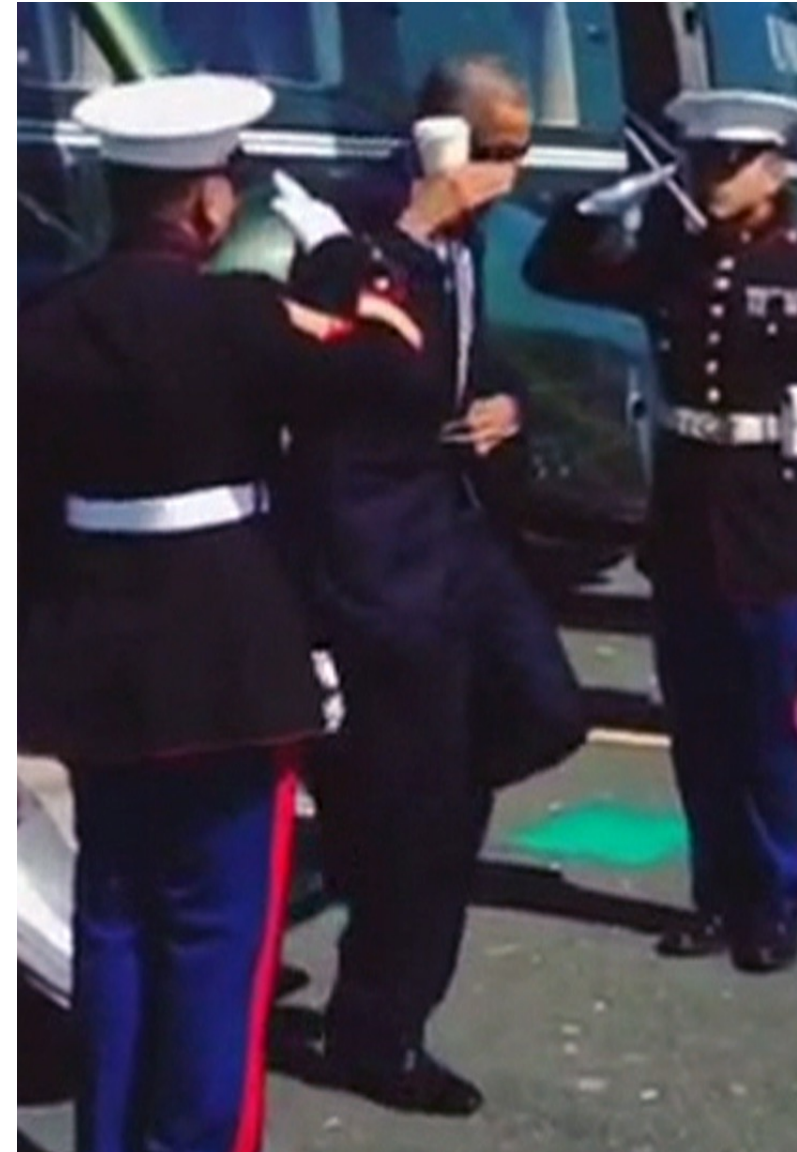
We can all agree that the senator's behavior was wrong and that she should be publicly censured.



# TRUMPING UP

When grandstanders moralize a previously non-moral issue.

E.g., In 2014, President Obama walked past two Marines and returned their salute while carrying a coffee cup. Normal military protocol recommends against saluting while carrying an object. Conservative commentators rushed to heap moral criticism on Obama. Karl Rove said, “The idea that I’m going to just jaunt out there with my chai tea, and give them the old . . . I mean please, how disrespectful was that?”



# STRONG EMOTIONS

When grandstanders display excessive levels of moral outrage.

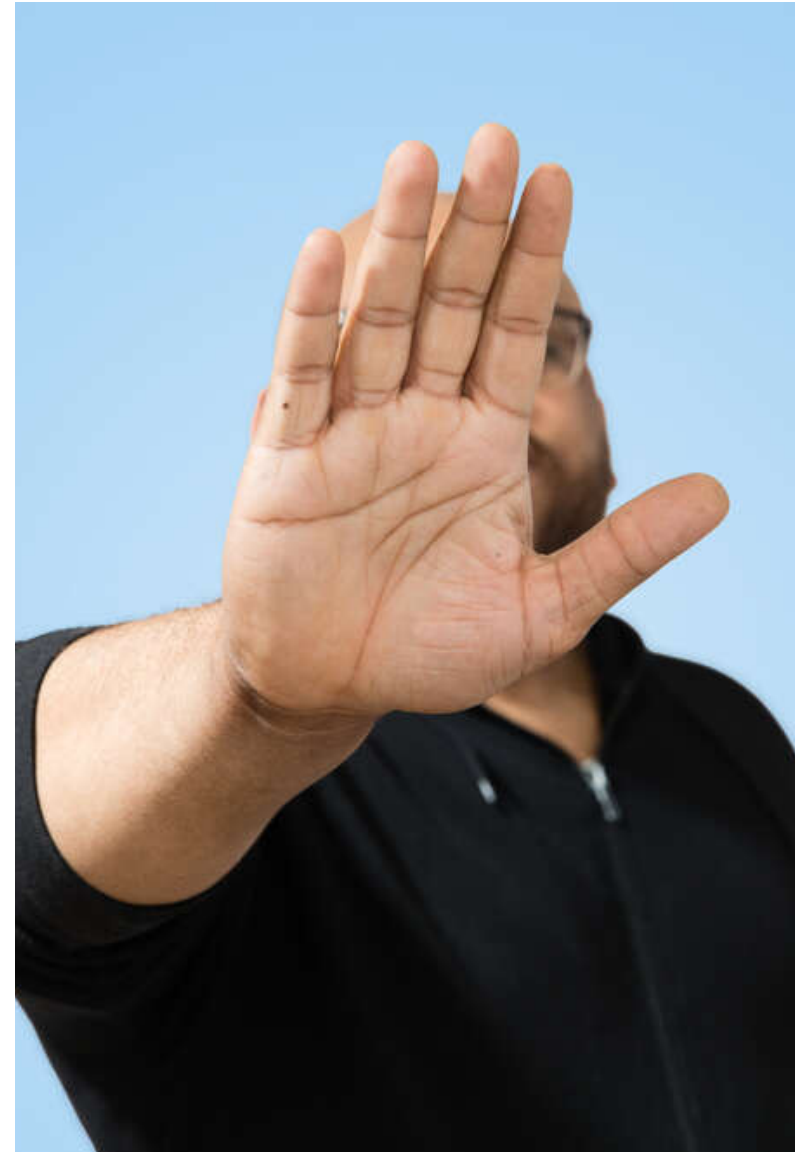
Attempt to display that one **cares the most** about justice and has a keener moral insight than others.



# SELF-EVIDENCE

Grandstanders often claim that their views are self-evidently true.

E.g., “If you cannot see that this war is just, then your views are beneath contempt, and I refuse to engage you any further. And if you don’t understand why, I’m not going to waste my time explaining it to you. Do better.”



# THE HARMS OF GRANDSTANDING





# HARM 1: CYNICISM

Grandstanding promotes an unhealthy cynicism about moral discourse.

## **How does grandstanding promote cynicism?**

As grandstanding becomes more widespread, it leads to a devaluation of the social currency of moral talk.

**Do Tosi and Warmke also make people more cynical about moral talk?**



# HARM 2: POLARIZATION

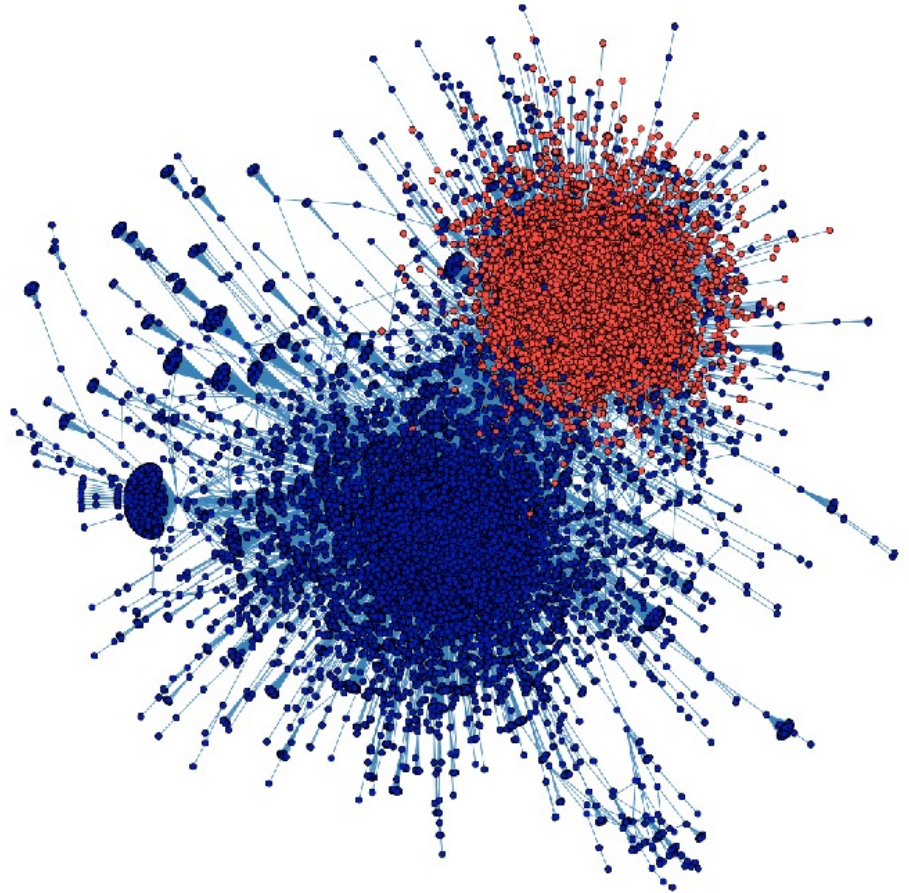
## **Intra-group polarization**

Members of a single group move toward a more extreme version of the group's view.

## **Inter-group polarization**

Two separate groups move further apart from each other, as their individual members are drawn toward more extreme views.

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.



## HARM 3: OUTRAGE EXHAUSTION

When public discourse is flooded with outrage, the meaning of that red flag is devalued.

Two Bad Effects:

1. We will often have a more difficult time recognizing when outrage is a reliable signal of injustice.
2. We will find it increasingly difficult to muster outrage when it actually is appropriate.



## HARM 4: LAZINESS



**Slacktivism:** The practice of supporting a political or social cause by means such as social media or online petitions, characterized as involving very little effort or commitment.

### **What are some examples?**

- "liking," "sharing," or "tweeting" about a cause
- signing an Internet petition
- copying and pasting a message in support of the cause
- sharing specific hashtags associated with the cause
- altering one's profile photo to indicate solidarity

## HARM 5: MODERATES CHECK OUT

- We do not want to be the target of an online shaming mob.
- So, we may avoid moral and political conversations.
- As a result, politics becomes overrun by people with extreme views.
- Also, these people are the least likely to encounter those with different political views.



# THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

In their book *Grandstanding*, Tosi and Warmke say: “This is not a book about social media. It is about moral talk.”

But most public discussion about morality and politics takes place on social media.

Also, the internet may have **incentives** that promote grandstanding.

- E.g., “Every time I would call someone racist or sexist, I would get a rush. That rush would then be reaffirmed and sustained by the stars, hearts, and thumbs-up that constitute the nickels and dimes of social media validation.”



# THE BENEFITS OF GRANDSTANDING?

- Grandstanders may inspire followers and cause social pressure for reform.
- Even if motivated by self-promotion, it can lead to much good.
- Seeking the approval of others (and need for community) can improve our society.

