Grandstanding as a Progressor's Temptation

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Abstract: Is moral grandstanding actually bad? Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke (2016; 2020) think so. Neil Levy, in "Virtue Signaling is Virtuous," (2021) counters their view. He argues that grandstanding, or what he'll call virtue signaling, is *not just morally permissible, but necessary*. In this paper, I seek a line through their accounts. First, I'll address two important interpretative differences between them. I'll consider the fit between 'virtue signaling' and 'grandstanding.' And I'll interrogate Levy's identification of grandstanding as a primarily epistemic issue. Next, I'll argue that, even if it were a primarily epistemic issue, second-order evidence won't contribute much. Lastly, squaring these accounts, I'll claim that grandstanding is both *a common social error and moral bad*. Grandstanding can be understood as a kind of moral progressor's temptation. As progressors, we require external checks to measure our moral development. But that same approval distracts us. It introduces a temptation to target gaining praise for our virtues, rather than actually developing them. Inasmuch, grandstanding is a bad that often comes along with *becoming* a better person. Its dual status reflects a tragic truth about our moral and social lives.

Keywords: grandstanding, moral progressors, second-order evidence, virtue signaling.

1. Introduction

Is moral grandstanding actually bad? Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke (2016; 2020) theorize moral grandstanding, and condemn it as immoral across three leading ethical frameworks: consequentialism, deontology and virtue ethics. Neil Levy, in "Virtue Signaling is Virtuous," (2021) counters their view. He argues that grandstanding, or what he'll call virtue signaling, is *not just morally permissible, but necessary*. In what follows, I'll argue that *grandstanding may be a common social behavior, but it is still a moral bad.* Just because something is common-place doesn't make it good. In fact, grandstanding's status as both familiar and bad shows something tragic about our moral development and sociality.

Before we can approach this thesis, however, there are interpretive matters to settle. Levy's account relies on two critical interpretative differences. First, he replaces 'grandstanding' with 'virtue signaling,' and the latter term, because of its pre-existing academic uses, affects our intuitions about its moral status. Second, he thinks of moral talk as consistently deliberative, while Tosi and Warmke do not. These differences lead Levy to think of grandstanding as an *epistemic* problem,

while Tosi and Warmke take it to be *moral* one.[1] And, I'll argue, even if it were an epistemic issue, Levy's higher evidence thesis won't help much.

Despite these differences, I'll consider what happens if we let both accounts stand. That is, if Tosi and Warmke and Levy are discussing the same phenomenon, how can we square their observations? The way to do so, I take it, is to accept my thesis. Again, *grandstanding is common-place social behavior, but it is still a bad one*. As I'll explain, grandstanding can be thought of as a kind of moral progressor's temptation, a regular pitfall along the path to virtue or reflective endorsement of one's moral life. The absolutely moral person won't grandstand, but the person on her way to being moral will. The progressor confuses the ends and means of her action. The particular actions she takes are for the end of a moral life, but she gets caught up in celebrating her particular successes, as if they were their own end. So, grandstanding is a bad behavior that often comes along with *becoming* a better person.

2.i. Tosi & Warmke's View

So, what is grandstanding? And why might it be immoral? On Tosi and Warmke's view, moral grandstanding is an abuse of moral talk. They write:

> …moral grandstanding is the use of moral talk for self-promotion. To grandstand is to turn your moral talk into a vanity project. Grandstanders are moral showboaters trying to impress others with their moral credentials. (2020, 6)

Insofar as it takes advantage of moral talk for personal or individual purposes, grandstanding looks to be a moral bad. Tosi and Warmke evaluate it as such across three leading ethical frameworks: consequentialism, deontology and virtue ethics. On the first, they argue, grandstanding has bad consequences. It leads to group polarization, outrage exhaustion, and general cynicism about moral talk. On the second, grandstanding uses others without due respect for their autonomy and rationality. Grandstanders manipulate. Likewise, grandstanders free ride on systems of larger social cooperation. They make exceptions for themselves, but rely on others following the rules. And on the third and final framing, they argue that the grandstander's motivation undermines their virtuousness. The ethical individual is motivated civically. She does the right thing for the right reasons. On the other hand, the grandstander, wittingly or unwittingly, is motivated primarily egoistically. Her contributions, although

[1] In recent literature, Evan Westra (2021) and William Tuckwell (2022) also argue that virtue signaling isn't a significant problem. Their accounts run off the same interpretive differences as Levy's. Tuckwell's account runs off of the first difference, and Westra's takes up with the second. Westra's account explicitly treats virtue signaling as an epistemic problem. Tuckwell sticks with a moral interpretation of virtue signaling, but argues that it bears positive moral consequences. However, his only morally persuasive case is one of virtue signaling in the traditional philosophical sense, not grandstanding. In this way, he makes Levy's mistake of subbing out 'virtue signaling' for 'grandstanding' when the two are non-identical.

they're supposed to be about social justice, say, are really about her (2020, 121). From this convergence argument, Tosi and Warmke conclude that grandstanding is *bad*, and it should be avoided. Identifying and mitigating it will make our social world better.

2.ii. Levy's Objection

Tosi and Warmke see two possible ways to push against their view. Either 1) one might argue that grandstanding doesn't actually have the problems that they point out, or 2) one could argue that its benefits outweigh its costs (2020).[2]

[2] William Tuckwell (2022) takes a third path. Tuckwell maintains that virtue signaling produces a mix of bad *and good* results. Given this mix of results, he argues, we shouldn't maintain a "strong moral presumption against it." (2022, 10) He provides three cases to support his point. Each is designed to be i) an example of (non-philosophical) virtue signaling, and ii) have a good moral outcome. However, as I'll show, each case fails i), ii), or both.
In his first case, Tuckwell argues that Marcus Rashford of Manchester United virtue signaled by calling for continued governmental COVID-19 crisis support over Twitter. He writes: "Rashford's virtue signaling had positive consequences. It functioned to signal his trustworthiness, facilitate co-operation and bring about a lot of good." (2022, 3) This case hinges on the difference between 'virtue signaling' and 'grandstanding.' Like Levy, Tuckwell has swapped terms, but the phenomenon they discuss are non-identical. Rashford's actions are best captured by the traditional philosophical concept of 'virtue signaling.' It looks like Rashford is, in fact, in possession of virtue and his action is simply an expression of it. Thus, Case 1 fails i).
In his second case, Tuckwell describes a scenario in which a female co-worker confides in 'you' and your male co-workers that your boss has sexually harassed her. Tuckwell suggests that 'piling on' and expressing moral outrage towards your boss is i) virtue signaling, and ii) provides a good moral outcome *insofar as it avoids cultivating her distrust of you* (2022, 5-6). I am very reluctant to evaluate this result as *morally good*. The male co-worker's piling on does little to help his female co-worker, or protect her from further harassment. Wouldn't a *moral* outcome look like her co-workers supporting her in real ways, rather than voicing empty platitudes to protect their own reputations? In addition, this looks to be an example of 'grandstanding', rather than 'virtue signaling.' The scenario is told from the 2nd person perspective, which allows us to see into the protagonist's mind. His biggest concern is *his own reputation*, rather than the safety and well-being of his female colleague. He is acutely motivated by *recognition desire.* Case 2 fails i) and ii).
In Tuckwell's third case, a minority student named Christopher, who feels he may have been discriminated against, attends a University's 93% meeting, wherein he stands up and "reports his experiences (at the university) as morally troubling." (2022, 7) This, Tuckwell argues, is i) virtue signaling, and ii) has a good outcome, because it fosters Christopher's intellectual self-trust. While I agree that Christopher's case has a good moral outcome, I am wary of calling it virtue signaling (or grandstanding). Christopher's speech doesn't seem to express his moral status. Rather, in it, he articulates his experience of oppression. This phenomenon seems better captured by concepts from the Epistemic Injustice literature. Likely Chris has had a hermeneutical lacuna over his experiences, and in articulating them to this group of allies, finally gains the tools to understand them. Case 3, thus, fails ii).
In sum, Tuckwell's cases are designed to carry his thesis – that virtue signaling has both negative and positive outcomes, so we shouldn't see it as a straightforward moral bad –, but his cases fail to adequately motivate that view.

Neil Levy takes a version of this first route. *On Levy's view, grandstanding is not only morally permissible, but necessary.* He writes: "Virtue signaling is morally appropriate. Virtue signaling neither expresses vices, nor is hypocritical, nor does it degrade the quality of public moral discourse." (2021, 9545) This is because virtue signaling, according to Levy, helps to solve the social coordination problem. The social coordination problem is this. As a highly social species, we rely heavily on one another's cooperation. But, in our highly complex and mobile social world, it is difficult to know first-hand about every person with whom we interact. The trust required to function in this kind of world opens opportunities for free riders. Free riders take advantage of social systems without paying their dues. Not only are free riders annoying, but they can compromise the integrity of an entire system. On Levy's view, virtue signaling is a reliable indicator of trustworthiness, given it is properly epistemic and sincere (2021, 9559). By proving these conditions, he'll argue that virtue signaling helps weed out free riders, and preserves social coordination.

On Levy's interpretation, the Tosi and Warmke concern with grandstanding is that it distorts epistemic processes. Levy writes:

> According to Tosi and Warmke, virtue signaling is epistemically objectionable. While it is capable of changing minds, the mechanism whereby belief change occurs through signaling is ir- or a-rational, and thereby unlikely to produce well justified beliefs. Rational deliberation occurs via the presentation of argument and evidence, and appropriate response to such evidence. Virtue signaling produces belief change through social comparison, they argue, and 'social comparison is not truth-sensitive.' (2021, 9550)

On Levy's read, moral grandstanding is motivated by social comparison. Social comparison is an a- or irrational factor, and so is an inappropriate source of belief justification. Grandstanding thus distorts epistemic processes. In light of this specific concern, Levy goes about defending grandstanding, by making a case for its epistemic legitimacy.

Levy argues that the justification produced by grandstanding *is rational*. It provides us with higher order evidence, or evidence about there being evidence, he says. Grandstanding can reflect individual *confidence in a claim.* And grandstanding can reflect the *number of individuals who support a claim*, which in turn should add to our confidence for that claim (2021, 9549). The social epistemology literature shows us that both numbers and confidence are rational factors, and should count in the sum total of our evidence for maintaining beliefs. These are inductive evidential reasons that there is evidence that has supported these commitments. So, moral grandstanding is not a problem because of how it distorts epistemic deliberation. Virtue signaling doesn't undermine, he says, but actually supports the "deliberative function of moral discourse." (2021, 9555)

This meta-evidential read puts Levy on the hook for a second claim. For grandstanding to count as second order evidence, it must also always be honest.[3] To defend against the possible 'hypocrisy' of grandstanding, Levy builds an analogy with fitness signaling in biology. As the peacock's brilliant plumage indicates its fitness to its mate, virtue signaling indicates an individual's epistemic fitness to a community (2021, 9553). He says, society is too complicated for reputation to track individual's trustworthiness, and virtue signaling is our evolutionary adaptation to signal our trustworthiness to others. Thus, it solves the social coordination problem.[4] Such signals, Levy argues, are 1) 'hard to fake,' because they are costly, and 2) would fall out of use, or basically would evolve out of use, if they were ineffective (2021, 9554-5).

Together, the epistemic character of virtue signaling, plus its sincerity, allow Levy to claim that virtue signaling is not a vice, but rather a virtue. He writes, "Given that a central function of moral discourse is signaling commitment to norms, the claims that virtue signaling represent a perversion of the justifying function of such discourse is on very shaky ground." (2021, 9555) And he concludes: "…signaling is a function of moral talk, not a perversion of it." (2021, 9555) For Levy, these points all hang together. For virtue signaling to be properly evidential, and not a- or ir-rational persuasive, it has to be honest. And, its status as virtuous, rather than vicious, rests on the truth of the first two claims.

2.iii. Responses to Objections:

Both Tosi and Warmke and Levy detail philosophically robust accounts. So, how do they get such divergent results? As I'll show, Levy's account is mismatched with Tosi and Warmke's in two critical places, and this leads him to a different outcome. First, Levy replaces 'grandstanding' with 'virtue signaling.' And second, Levy thinks of moral talk as distinctly deliberative, while Tosi and Warmke do not.[5]

Although 'virtue signaling' is the more familiar term, its common usage adds interpretative confusion to the conversation. Put most weakly, Levy replaces 'grandstanding' with 'virtue signaling,' and the latter term, because of its pre-

[3] Evan Westra (2021) sees virtue signaling as an epistemic issue, too, but his account adds depth to the question of virtue signaler's honesty. Westra agrees that virtue signalers transmit norms that they actually endorse, because if they don't 'practice what they preach,' they look suspect in the social eye (2021, 169). However, he tells us, virtue signaling is consistent with another kind of hypocrisy. He writes: "Even when virtue signalers' actions are aligned with their moral claims, their underlying attitudes are not, which is its own kind of hypocrisy. Virtue signalers would have others believe that they are motivated by moral beliefs when they are really acting out of reputational concerns." (2021, 169) Here, as I'll expand on in Section 2.iv., the argument for the epistemic reliability of virtue signaling further illustrates what is *morally* wrong about it. Insofar as it is epistemically consistent with conflicted and hypocritical motives, virtue signaling manipulates and takes advantage of others.

[4] Note this is exactly opposite the Tosi and Warmke idea that the grandstander is actually a free-rider.

existing academic uses, affects our intuitions about its moral status. Put more strongly, subbing out terms here might *beg the question* of the moral legitimacy of the phenomena in question. For, on Levy's account, *if* virtue signaling is *honest*, *then* it offers reliable second order evidence, and is virtuous. By subbing out the term 'virtue signaling' for 'grandstanding,' Levy seems to build these conditions into his target concept.

Let's take a closer look. The trouble with using the term 'virtue signaling,' rather than 'grandstanding,' is that it is a term which already has a particular philosophical meaning. To virtue signal in the traditional sense is to express excellence of character. In it, the action of virtue carries virtue. This definition of virtue signaling is consistent with its use across academic disciplines. In biology, for example, signaling typically indicates presence. Tosi and Warmke address this difference, too. They write: "Notice that when we say 'X signals Y' we often mean that X actually has Y." (2020, 38) On this read, to say someone is virtue signaling implies that they have the virtue in question. And this fact is central to Levy's account of moral grandstanding's epistemic legitimacy.

But honesty isn't central to the problem of grandstanding. As Tosi and Warmke tell us, the grandstander can be sincere or insincere about what they say. *A grandstander can believe everything they say, and still grandstand*. Nothing hinges on the sincerity of the content of their contribution. Nor, as it seems worth mentioning, does the grandstander have to say anything false. A grandstander can be honest, insightful, and even right in their views. (2020, 40).

The second difference in the two accounts comes from how each defines moral talk. One way Tosi and Warmke articulate the concept of grandstanding is that it is the *abuse of moral talk*. Insofar as moral talk is the good that is misused in grandstanding, any productive analysis and argument regarding the latter, should agree about what moral talk is. But, it doesn't look like the parties do agree about what moral talk is. It seems that Levy thinks moral talk is always deliberative, while Tosi and Warmke do not.

Tosi and Warmke give three kinds of definitions of moral talk. These are as follows:

> The Hortatory Definition: "Public moral discourse involves communication that is intended to bring some moral matter to public consciousness." (2016, 200)
>
> The Deliberative Definition: "…the aim of public moral discourse is to improve people's moral beliefs, or to spur moral improvement in the world." (2016, 210)
>
> The Practical Definition: "[Moral talk] is our primary means of bringing morality to bear on practical problems." (2020, 4)

So, on Tosi and Warmke's view, moral talk is hortatory, deliberative, and practical. In contrast, on Levy's view, the moral communication or discourse is

exclusively deliberative (2021, 9548).[6] That is, moral talk consists in attempts to rationally persuade one's epistemic peers and community of one's view on a given moral issue. Moral talk is reasoned, persuasive exchange. While this is a plausible idea, it turns out that it is, again, ill-fitted with Tosi and Warmke's view. For Tosi and Warmke's moral talk is not exclusively deliberative. Nothing in their definitions require that it be so. Rather, on their view, moral talk consists of making moral assertions. I take it that it is the examples each focus on that lead them to different interpretations of moral talk.

The examples that Tosi and Warmke use are non-deliberative. From Harvey Weinstein to Roy Moore and Meryl Streep, to reactions to "Obama's Disrespectful "Latté Salute," (2020, 55) Tosi and Warmke's examples all consist of reports or assertions. And their first-personal cases do, too. Consider the Twitter post. Or Warmke's claim that he avoids gluten (2020, 169). While grandstanding can certainly happen in deliberative exchange, nothing about moral grandstanding *requires* that it occur in deliberative contexts. Moral talk is just as much about making moral assertions.

I take it that Levy's deliberative interpretation comes from his focus on one particular example from Tosi and Warmke's Peasoup Symposium. In it, they write:

> By that we mean that what causes people to alter their views or stated positions is predominantly a desire to hold a prized place within the in-group. The relevant incentive, then, is not to cease modifying one's beliefs or stated positions once one arrives at the truth, but to stop once an even more extreme position would no longer impress one's in-group. Our objection, then, is not to radical or 'extreme' views, as such, but rather to the process by which group members arrive at them. That process does not reliably track truth, but rather something else. Extreme views arrived at via the process of ramping up, driven by the mechanism of social comparison, are unlikely to be correct. (2017)

Levy takes this case to be paradigmatic. But it is an example of one very specific kind of grandstanding. In citing it, in fact, Levy excludes the last sentence above. The reader isn't meant to think of this phenomenon in connection to ramping up, given Levy's presentation of it. But this example specifically discusses ramping up. Ramping up occurs when, within a group, individuals make stronger and stronger moral claims to outdo one another, and look like the most morally superior. Obviously, the justification of these claims comes into question, because they're motivated by social comparison, which bears no relevant evidential

[6] Another reading of Levy's strategy might be the following. Tosi and Warmke's main argument has three prongs. Rather than misinterpreting Tosi and Warmke, Levy might be simply isolating and attending to one prong of their argument, namely, the epistemic dimension of grandstanding. On this reading, by defending grandstanding's positive role in deliberative, Levy's argument should shear off one supporting branch of Tosi and Warmke's view. And, this take-down should score Levy a point.
While this might be Levy's strategy, I'm not convinced that Levy's argument is successful. Even granting this alternate reading of his strategy, his case for the epistemic reliability of grandstanding doesn't hold water. I argue this at length in Section 3, pages 7-9.

connection to the issue. In this kind of grandstanding, there is an epistemic issue. But this is a specific kind of grandstanding, not a basic case. It seems more likely that the epistemic bad here is actually a downstream problem from the primary moral bad of grandstanding.

For, is the epistemic issue really the problem with moral grandstanding? Does saying that beliefs formed as the result of moral grandstanding can be properly justified mean moral grandstanding is not a moral problem? I'll suggest that it isn't and that it doesn't. Epistemic missteps aren't central to what grandstanding is. The grandstander can be right, and justifiably so. He never has to say anything false, or anything that does not transmit justification (2020, 30). A grandstander can still have the right relationship to the evidence. The concept in its basic form doesn't rely on either of these points. Grandstanding in its base cases still asserts things that can be true, and that grandstanders believe. The bad of moral grandstanding is elsewhere.

2.iv. First Conclusion

Moral grandstanding isn't an epistemological bad, it is a moral one. The problem with grandstanding isn't how it effects belief justification – although in some instances justification is affected –, but in how it treats other people. On the deontological model, moral grandstanding is a problem, because it uses other people. Others listen to the grandstander under the pretense that he is motivated primarily by the issue at hand, but he is actually primarily motivated to speak for the sake of his own self-image. This looks like a species of lying. Note that the free-rider problem still obtains. Here epistemological factors don't bear on the morality of grandstanding. [7] The central issue is that the grandstander's motivation is misplaced. Insofar as this is the case, moral grandstanding continues to be a bad on the virtue ethical and consequentialist accounts. Grandstanding is not civically motivated behavior. And, because it is disrespectful and un-civic, it yields bad practical consequences in the social-political world.

You can disrespect others, or make moral mistakes, without making epistemological errors. A defense of grandstanding's epistemic correctness doesn't make moral grandstanding ethically permissible. In fact, rightly understood, nothing essential rides on the epistemic quality of grandstanding. Moral grandstanding is bad because of how it treats others. It is not bad because it leads to false or improperly justified beliefs.

But maybe this isn't generous enough. In the next section, I'll set aside the issue of the dis-analogy of the two views, and consider Levy's second-order

[7] Westra's account is subject to this same critique, as I note in Section 2.ii. The fact of the matter is that virtue signaling presents a moral concern. Even if it functions lawfully epistemically, the way in which it does so, inherently fails to respect others. Insofar as it is epistemically consistent with conflicted and hypocritical motives, virtue signaling manipulates and takes advantage of others.

evidence thesis independently. (That is, as if grandstanding were an exclusively epistemic issue.)

3. Second-order Evidence & Epistemic Justification

Although I've argued that grandstanding isn't an epistemic issue, it's worth considering Levy's argument further. Could Levy's second-order evidence argument make a strong case for grandstanding if it were a primarily epistemic issue? So, what about Levy's claim that grandstanding is properly *epistemic*, because it provides second order evidence? I agree with Levy that grandstanding can provide higher order evidence. But, given the quality of evidence it provides, this fact isn't enough to call grandstanding epistemically justified (and so morally necessary).

Levy argues that individual *confidence* in a claim and the sheer *number* of individuals who assent to a claim are both 'evidential' facts that should count as second order evidence (2021, 9548). Second order evidence is evidence of evidence. As Richard Feldman writes: "More carefully, evidence that there is evidence for P is evident for P is evidence for P." (2011, 151) In other words, my believing in X should count as a factor for X's likelihood itself. The mere fact that I maintain X should count as an additional point in favor of it.

What Levy does with the second-order evidence thesis is straight-forward. When he talks about confidence and about numbers as second order evidence, he i) accepts this initial claim. And ii) the sheer number of people who are confident in some view should add proportionate second order support for it. This is the intuitive extension of Feldman's view. For, each of these individuals has their own confidence in X, such that it should count to the sum total of support for that view.

I am happy to accept this set up. I just don't think it gets Levy as far as he thinks it does. I contend that even if we accept all of Levy's terms, the problem with grandstanding persists. To review, Levy's argues that 1) the problem with grandstanding is epistemic, but 2) grandstanding provides higher order evidence, and 3) it does so reliably, because it is done honestly.

But not all higher order evidence is equal. There can be stronger and weaker evidence at a higher level, too. Sincerity and confidence just look like the minimal standard for having a view. To have a view is to make a bold assertion. So, yes, there is evidence of evidence in grandstanding, but it is very weak evidence. If we take *confidence* and *numbers* to be pieces of evidence, we still need to ask, what is the source of that confidence or the source of the confidence in the sheer number of people who agree? They are possible items of epistemic justification, but, in grandstanding, they're still incorrectly motivated.

Consider numbers first. I take it that Levy thinks he defends against the motivation objection by saying virtue signaling is always honest. That is, on Levy's view, the person in question must also believe what they assert. The content of what a person says must match up with what they believe to count as epistemic. But is that really enough? One can believe the earth is flat, because their social

circle does.[8] The fact that one believes as a result of what those around them do, won't necessarily change how strongly or authentically they believe. They can fully, whole-heartedly maintain earth's flatness.

Here a view is genuinely endorsed, but for the wrong reasons. Yes, there is a process by which it is endorsed, but is it a process that produces reliable, truth-tracking epistemic results? No. In fact, this case is a fallacy. It is an appeal to the people. We know better than to endorse a claim *simply* because a lot of other people do. Insofar as it is fallacious, the second order evidence provided by sheer numbers looks to be a very weak piece of additional evidence. We need more substantial kinds of reasons.

A similar thing can be said about *confidence*. Take Levy's discussion of moral outrage. He writes: "In the cases of the kind Tosi and Warmke mention, the opinions of agents who are tentative in their support of gun control should be given less weight than others who are more confident. The expression of moral outrage is a particular powerful cue to confidence." (2021, 9551) In this instance, and many others, grandstanding amounts to establishing authority. But, does one's outrage guarantee their authority? When experts assert claims, they're epistemically well-placed. But, regular people having beliefs is just normal evidence. It isn't strong evidence without further qualification. Obviously, the gun-control example is one many of us find amenable. But other examples can be constructed. Consider the anti-mask and anti-vax movement. Individuals in this group are outraged and adamant that mask-wearing and vaccination arean infringement on their personal rights and bodily autonomy. Here moral outrage is present, but it doesn't like it should confer epistemic justification. These arguments are just arguments from outrage. It's not clear that these arguers really carry any relevant authority. This, like the former case, constitutes a fallacy.

In sum, grandstanding can make deliberative contributions, but it provides grounds for *weak inductions*. Grandstanding provides second order pieces of evidence, but the particular kinds of evidence that grandstanding provides are bad pieces of evidence. Because, even given all of Levy's stipulations, grandstanding is still socially motivated. Numbers and confidence can be explained by non-evidential causes, too. And, as Tosi and Warmke point out, one could say the same thing without that mismatched motivation. In conclusion, if virtue signaling does contribute to moral change and moral concept building, it must do so very minimally. And, insofar as it is actually possible, it would be far preferable, if moral claims were both honest and motivated by non-social evidential factors.

[8] Scott Hill and Renaud-Philippe Garner (2021) identify this same issue. For numbers and confidence to count as second order evidence, they tell us, deliberators must be sufficiently independent of one another per the Condorcet Jury Theorem. However, strong empirical evidence suggests that they are not. They conclude, "…testimony is evidence and virtue signaling is a form of evidence, [but] we think that evidence has a defeater." (2021, 14825)

4. Grandstanding as Progressor's Temptation

Finally, what if we set aside these differences, and allow both accounts to stand? If Tosi and Warmke and Levy are discussing the same phenomenon, how can we square their differing observations? The way to square their accounts, I take it, is to conclude the following. *Grandstanding is a common social behavior and a moral bad.* In this section, I'll examine in what sense it might be a necessity, and in the next, I'll examine how it is a moral bad.

Levy argues that grandstanding is necessary insofar as it solves the social coordination problem. As he explains, given the complexities of our social world and how often we move between communities, our moral track record won't always follow us, and we need additional ways to signal our reliability to new communities (2021, 9554). While I think this need exists, in reality, I think it is minimal. We have defaults set to assume trustworthiness (Coady 1992). And it seems to me that the best ways to communicate our moral decency is actually doing things like *listening*, asking thoughtful *questions*, and following up on our *commitments*, rather than making statements intended to highlight our own moral awesomeness. I suspect that people who do the former are those that we take most confidence in.[9]

The virtuous person behaves virtuously, and won't need to signal that virtuousness for the sake of social coordination. It will be evident already. In contrast, the person who insists on telling us about their donation to charity, or the last important article that they read, doesn't seem as socially effective or persuasive. As opposed to actually virtuous behaviors, grandstanding often proves alienating and off-putting to others. We find these behaviors uncomfortable, rather than compelling. So, despite the fact that we don't like it, why is grandstanding so common?

Grandstanding, I take it, is a kind of moral progressor's temptation. The progressor, because they are not yet perfect, confuses the means for the ends of their actions. A touchstone case comes from the Stoics. Stoic practitioners must learn logic before they can properly conduct investigations into ethical matters. Logic is studied first, but it is studied explicitly for the sake of ethics. In mastering logic, however, the Stoic student often mistakes logic for its own ends, and strays away from its rightful application in ethics.[10] Grandstanding represents a parallel problem. Although her end goal is an ethical life, the grandstander gets caught up in the self-congratulatory opportunities of her particular successes, and being seen as virtuous by themselves and by others. A helpful analogy can be found in sports. Learning how to 'juke,' 'meg' or 'rainbow' is part of becoming a masterful footballer, but players tend to overdo these moves. Players are *tempted* to

[9] This distinction allows us to accommodate Tuckwell's positive evaluation of Marcus Rashford. Rashford's action is an expression of actual virtue (even if it is also a PR move), and so is exemplary of 'virtue signaling,' not 'grandstanding.'

[10] For an in-depth discussion of the progressor's problem in Stoicism, see Scott Aikin (2020).

implement them, not to improve the game, but to demonstrate their own skillfulness. First and foremost, these 'tricks' serve to designate a memorable style of play for a player, and are a distraction from the real game.

Conceptualizing grandstanding as a *progressor's* problem illuminates why it is so commonplace, too. As progressors, we need feedback on our moral progress. While self-monitoring is helpful, we require others' help, too. Those around us can reflect back and affirm our choices, so we know we're headed in the correct direction. However, that same approval distracts us. It introduces a temptation to target gaining praise for our virtues, rather than actually developing them. We feel good when our progress is registered by others. And, for grandstanders, this moment of approbation becomes its own end, detracting from their real goals.[11]

Let me say this another way. To become moral, we require external checks. But this fact creates a temptation. The checks give us an occasion for personal and external approval or praise. This feedback tells us whether we are on the right track. And when we learn whether we are or are not, we adjust our behavior accordingly. That is, the praise should serve first and foremost as feedback directed toward our moral development. But, we like praise. And we easily get caught up in seeking that praise primarily, rather than for the sake of moral progress. This is the grandstander's error. Their target in moral talk is themselves. They want to be identified as the person identifying the moral issue at hand, and receive attention and praise for doing so. Inasmuch, the very process of becoming moral introduces the occasion to grandstand. The basic action of checking-in with others about our moral progress provides both incentive and opportunity to do so. As such, grandstanding looks to be a very tempting distraction built into much of our moral development.

Here I disagree with Levy. Levy thinks it is necessary insofar as it solves the social coordination problem. Grandstanding, on his account, is primarily to indicate one's reliability to others in their community. It is to show others one's moral reliability. In contrast, I am arguing that it primarily serves to inform the grandstander of her own status in a given community. It allows her to test her moral progress by others' reactions. And, inasmuch, it indicates something less than total reliability from her. Really, it shows she isn't totally virtuous yet.

Consider moral outrage. Moral outrage is in the service of protecting what's right. But it's easy to get caught up in the moral outrage itself, rather than directing that outrage toward the issue at hand. The perfectly ethical person experiences that outrage and then passes on to the next issue or moment.[12] In contrast, the

[12] Think here of Martha Nussbaum's account of Transitional Anger (2015). She writes: "…when anger makes sense, it is normatively problematic (focused on status); when it is normatively reasonable (focused on the injury), it doesn't make good sense, and is normatively problematic in a different way. In a rational person, anger, realizing that, soon laughs at itself and goes away." (52-53) It should "segue into forward-looking thoughts of welfare and, accordingly, from anger into compassionate hope, *the Transition*." (2015, 53)

progressor gets caught up in the moral outrage, and forgets or subverts what it's ultimately for, to the outrage itself.

This is how we get, for example, *performative wokeness*. We speak out in moral outrage in service of what is right. We do it, because we want to be good people. But, the moment or expression of moral outrage is addicting and we are easily caught up in and distracted by it, and forget about the larger goal of improving the world. We focus in on 'moral outrage' as its own end, rather than moral outrage for the sake of some bigger cause, the thing that is being done wrongly that causes the rage. Consider the following cases:

> **1) Blackout Tuesday & The Black Square:**
>
> In response to the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, social media users took to 'blacking out' or 'interrupting' their daily stream of content by posting a single black square to their Facebook or Instagram. Posting the black square demonstrated that the poster recognized the racial injustice in the United States, and supported the Black Lives Matter Movement.
>
> However, posting black squares to social media subverts the ultimate cause of racial justice to the individual's private cause of establishing moral decency. This is particularly clear when we consider that these posts are subject to 'Likes' and 'Shares.' When the issue itself should be most important, what is made more important is the poster's act of pointing out the issue. They see racial injustice as a problem, which is a step in the direction of what's moral, but get more caught up in identifying themselves as someone who sees the problem for what it is, rather then actually doing something about it.[13]
>
> **2) The 'This is what a feminist looks like' T-shirt:**
>
> Like racial justice, feminism is a moral end. Being a feminist is about fighting for gender equality, and working to dismantle patriarchy. The guy who wears the 'This is what a feminist looks like' T-shirt is a moral progressor. He recognizes the need for feminism and supports its aims. But, just like the individual who posts the black square, his wearing the shirt looks a lot more like a show of establishing his own moral decency, rather than advocating for women's rights. With it, he declares his moral status via the feminist platform. Again, this looks like someone who is on the path to virtuousness, but is distracted by the trappings along the way.

In all these cases, the gist is that on our way to becoming moral, we are tempted to flex our morality. This is true whether we are new progressors, or further along the path. We just can't help ourselves. But this kind of flex is actually a failure of being a good person for its own sake. It distracts us. And it pulls us away from achieving that end overall.

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[13] Now, and at the time, there were many more productive things that could have been done for racial justice. Posting the black square was an almost empty action. And, as it turned out, rather than interrupt the stream of regular social media posts, it clogged media streams and drowned out black voices.

5. A Culture of Grandstanding

The progressor's problem isn't just about the individual's temptation to grandstand. It is about how a culture of grandstanding can develop from it, too. And this showcases its moral badness. While grandstanding should be a progressor's temptation that individuals move beyond, if it has the useful payout in a community, it is kept as capital. With grandstanding, it isn't necessarily that the individual falls prey to the progressor's temptation – although, of course, this can happen –, it is equally possible that a progressor's trap has been set by those who have preceded us. If grandstanding behavior is one that others before us have fallen prey to, and moreover, behavior that has served others previously in that community, it can become a general cultural norm in a community.

Grandstanding inculcates more grandstanding. It communicates itself that grandstanding is okay. When newcomers to a community see others, who are well-established in that community, grandstand and be successful or accepted, it's read as passable behavior.

Ironically, though, nobody likes grandstanders. When others grandstand, as I've said, we feel alienated by it. A practical analysis of grandstanding can be found in *Spectrum,* the magazine of Australian Medical Imaging and Radiation Therapy. As its authors Andrew Murphy and Thomas Steffens observe, grandstanding appears to be toxic both for individuals, and deliberative groups as a whole (2017). Ironically, it seems that the only one who enjoys the behavior, may be the grandstander himself.[14] When an individual grandstands, they feel good. But, when they grandstand, those in his shared moral community find it, at best, off-putting and irritating, rather than compelling. At worst, when we suspect someone else of grandstanding, it becomes difficult to continue to engage with them. We see that they have a mixed motivation in their contributions, and they become difficult to trust.[15]

A culture of grandstanding then bears a larger problem. We have deliberative groups, and grandstanding is alienating for these groups. Yet, by hypotheses under the deliberative model, we need these same groups to make moral progress. Grandstanding looks like it impedes healthy deliberation. It looks to be group deliberative poison. And so, I argue contra Levy, it seriously threatens social coordination, and is a definite moral bad.

Enter the tragic. The progressor needs their deliberative community to develop morally, but their own imperfection – that is, their status as a moral progressor –, risks the integrity of that same community. To review, progressors require external feedback to make moral progress. External feedback creates distraction. Acted upon, the progressor's temptation proves toxic for the community that the progressor relies on. Put most mildly, the process of personal

[14] It's worth noting that this presents a case for how and why identifying grandstanding first-personally is good enough.

[15] This counters Tuckwell's (2022) argument on why virtue signaling actually builds trust.

moral growth may impede the community's moral deliberation. On this reading, grandstanding is something like a common pitfall along the path to virtue. But the issue can be put more strongly. It is possible that grandstanding is virtue destructive on a larger scale. The behavior that is used to build virtuous individuals can threaten the moral community itself.

6. Conclusion

Tosi and Warmke see grandstanding as an undeniable moral bad. In contrast to Tosi and Warmke, Levy sees grandstanding, or what he calls virtue signaling, as necessary to solve the social coordination problem. This, he argues, makes it moral. In this paper, I've sought a line through their differing accounts.

Ultimately, I've argued that grandstanding might be a common social behavior, but it is still a moral bad. I take it that grandstanding is not necessary insofar as it solves the social coordination problem. Rather, I've argued that it comes about as a kind of moral progressor's temptation. On the path to become better, others are often helpful to us. Those around us tend to see our progress more clearly than we ourselves. But checking in with others about our progress wins us praise, and we are easily distracted by that praise. The grandstander mistakes these means for the ends of moral action. But this doesn't make grandstanding moral itself. Grandstanding, when understood as a kind of progressor's temptation, is both *bad and normal*. Its dual status reflects a tragic truth about our moral and social lives. For, much of our moral improvement looks like it may risk the very community upon which it relies.

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