

Moral grandstanding and unhealthy cynicism: How unhealthy cynicism does not necessarily pervert public moral discourse

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Abstract

Moral grandstanding occurs when one tries to promote one's reputation as morally respectable. A concern in philosophy, promulgated by Tosi and Warmke, is that *pervasive* moral grandstanding generates unhealthy cynicism that propels people to disengage from public moral discourse (2016, p. 210). Nevertheless, I argue that this worry is misguided, since excess cynicism triggers information consumers to employ self-correcting mechanisms that ultimately negate the purported impacts of moral grandstanding. In this paper, I outline two self-correction methods: passive correction through noise reduction and active correction through information verification. In the prior method, rational agents engage in 'mental handicapping' and discount grandstanding expressions. This enables people to sequester noises from quality contributions in moral discourse. For the latter method, agents conduct accountability checks and investigate the veracity of claims. This promotes listener participation in public debates. In all, the corrective consequences of amplified cynicism not only attenuate the apparent injurious effects of grandstanding but enhance the quality of public moral discourse.

Introduction

When former US President Donald Trump announced that he would issue a posthumous pardon for suffragist Susan B Anthony, some members of the public labelled him a moral grandstander (Stollznow, 2020). As Tosi and Warmke define it, moral grandstanding¹ relates to promoting one's reputation as morally respectable (2016, p. 199). According to these authors, a speaker grandstands when they have the desire to be recognised as being moral and produce an expression that signals their virtuousness (2016, pp. 200–201). In the literature, the concern is that grandstanding injures public moral discourse. Grubbs and colleagues highlight how grandstanding exacerbates political polarisation (2020, p. 1). Similarly, Tosi and Warmke also underscore polarisation as a negative consequence to grandstanding (2016, p. 210). In addition, the duo stipulates three other impacts of grandstanding on moral discourse: free-riding problems, outrage exhaustion, and unhealthy cynicism (Tosi and Warmke, 2016, p. 210). Unlike these authors, I will argue that not all forms of grandstanding pervert public moral discourse. In particular, Tosi and Warmke are exaggerating the effects of grandstanding in their unhealthy cynicism argument.

This contention will be crystallised in a fourfold manner. In Section I, I will explain the characteristics of moral grandstanding. Specifically, I will examine what moral grandstanding entails, why one grandstands, and how it is manifested. In Section II, I will decipher Tosi and Warmke's unhealthy cynicism argument by examining the purported damages *excess* cynicism brings to public discourse. Extending this thread of inquiry, I will illustrate how heightened scepticism gives rise to self-correcting mechanisms that ultimately

¹ Henceforth, grandstanding. It is also used interchangeably with virtue signalling, which is the more commonly used term in the literature.

counter the insidious effects of grandstanding. Finally, in Sections III and IV, I will delineate the passive and active self-correction arguments, raise potential counterclaims, and address lingering concerns. In this essay, I will use the climate change campaign on social media and the Volkswagen emission scandal as case studies to illustrate how the apparent effects of grandstanding do not occur in practice.

Section I: Characteristics of moral grandstanding

Tosi and Warmke identify two main characteristics of grandstanding: (i) the recognition desire and (ii) the grandstanding expression (2016, pp. 200–201). The first characteristic relates to the agent's *desire* to be acknowledged as being virtuous. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, being virtuous means 'having good moral qualities and behaviour' (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). For a grandstander, this means that they either meet a normative baseline or well exceed a minimum moral threshold (Tosi and Warmke, 2016, p. 200). Moreover, one's recognition desire can further be divided into two categories: altruistic and egoistic. Altruistic desires arise from people who *truly* care. For instance, a Greenpeace activist may signal their support for carbon neutral policies on social media because they genuinely believe that government intervention is beneficial. They signal their moral stance to garner more support for the issue. Egoistic grandstanders on the other hand, need not support the cause. They might be indifferent to or even deny climate change but merely wish to *appear* moral. In this essay, I will assume that grandstanders are egoistic and show that even egoistic intentions do not necessarily pervert public moral discourse.

The second component of Tosi and Warmke's characterisation of grandstanding is the grandstanding expression. In addition to having a recognition desire, an agent produces a *statement* that signals their morally respectable reputation. The duo lists five manifestations of such expressions: trumping up, emotional display, self-evidence, ramping up, and piling on (Tosi and Warmke, 2016, p. 203). For this essay, I will focus on piling on, which can be defined as adding to the discussion by reiterating what has already been said. An example would be climate strike post retweets that announce one's support for such events (often with identical phrases already seen in other reposts). In this case, the agent is not producing any novel opinions, but renewing what has already been discussed. With the characteristics of grandstanding elucidated, a definition of being virtuous provided, and the manifestations of virtue signalling expressions explained, we can now turn to understanding why the unhealthy cynicism argument is unfounded.

Section II: Deciphering the unhealthy cynicism argument

As Tosi and Warmke stipulate, grandstanding results in unhealthy cynicism, which leads to the 'devaluation of the social currency of moral talk' (2016, p. 210). Upon further dissection, the authors' position is fundamentally concerned with the impact of '*pervasive*' grandstanding (Tosi and Warmke, 2016, p. 217), and how it subsequently generates *excess* distrust among the public. When grandstanders start to pile on in masses—as evident in social media when one's feed is filled with the 'let's stop climate change' infographic with '#bethechange'—cynicism breeds. That is, information consumers become increasingly sceptical of and disillusioned with the intention of speakers. While the scholars do not explicate how cynicism differs from *unhealthy* cynicism in their writing, it is implied that the latter concerns *excess* scepticism. Knowing that some egoistic speakers are merely trying to grandstand, information consumers become *more* dismissive of climate change discourse and engage less with the issue. Tosi and Warmke further contend that this distrust creeps into normal discourse even when grandstanding is absent (2016, p. 211), highlighting the extent of damage. Thus, the aggregated effect of grandstanding through piling on is heightened distrust, which subsequently leads to disengagement, which decreases the quality of public discourse.

Nevertheless, I argue that the very nature of *excess* cynicism negates the injurious impacts of virtue signalling. This is due to the self-correcting mechanisms information consumers employ in their cognitive process. If we accept Tosi and Warmke's stance on the prevalence of grandstanding (and how this generates unhealthy cynicism), then we should realise that people discount signalling behaviours more often by employing corrective actions. This contention crystallised below:

P1: Grandstanding is pervasive.

P2: The pervasiveness of grandstanding leads to excess cynicism.

P3: Excess cynicism reflects an awareness of grandstanding behaviour.

P4: Awareness of grandstanding behaviour results in corrective actions.

P5: Corrective actions negate the negative impacts of excess cynicism.

C: Excess cynicism that arises from pervasive grandstanding does not lead to negative outcomes as such impacts are negated by corrective actions.

The critical components that are missing from the duo's argument are premises 3 and 4. They overlook the listener's rational response (i.e. acting optimally based on known information) to grandstanding. Given that information consumers *know* the manifestation of piling on and its consequence, it is reasonable to infer that they would act on such knowledge. This consequently offsets the harmful effects of grandstanding.

To recap, I have examined Tosi and Warmke's unhealthy cynicism argument in this section. Their main worry is how pervasive grandstanding leads to an increased disengagement from public discourse due to heightened scepticism in information consumers. Though cynicism is integral to their argument, Tosi and Warmke do not explicate what *unhealthy* cynicism means. This gap in definition gave rise to my 'excess scepticism' interpretation, which ultimately enabled me to build a case against the scholars. Agreeing with them on the pervasiveness of grandstanding, and how this leads to unhealthy cynicism, I have underscored the fact that heightened cynicism reflects some level of awareness of grandstanding behaviours. Assuming rationality in information recipients, the knowledge of grandstanding acts would likely prompt corrective actions. In the following sections, I will demonstrate how listeners may react by exercising passive and active corrective mechanisms, and how these methods counteract the consequences of grandstanding through noise reduction and information verification.

Section III: The passive self-correction argument and its counterclaim

The passive self-correction argument is fundamentally concerned with noise reduction in information processing. Noise in this context refers to a 'distorted mixing of information flows' (Hilbert, 2012, p. 5). If genuine contributions to climate change discourse are the quality input that is crucial for an agent to engage with the topic, then egoistic self-promoting statements are the noise that distract listeners from the real debate. Such noise clouds the judgment of information recipients. Notwithstanding, knowing that noise is present, listeners are likely to react by filtering out insubstantial grandstanding statements. For example, people might discount the value of virtue signalling expressions on social media mentally as they scroll past such posts. This form of 'mental handicapping' in effect declutters the information-scape for the listener. Tosi and Warmke might argue that this is exactly how disengagement culminates. However, what I have illustrated is not the total dismissal of information, but the *isolation* of *irrelevant* ones. Indeed, passive self-correction through noise reduction actually enhances the quality of public discourse.

To explain this point further, I have devised the 'Pathological Liar' example below.

Suppose people are either pathological liars or truth tellers. Upon meeting a person and having had a conversation with them, I am instantly aware that they say questionable things and might be a pathological liar. Consequently, I discount the believability of their words. Nonetheless, this is not to say that I am distrusting of *all* people. I can still engage meaningfully with truth tellers.

As seen, the sequestration of pathological liars from truth tellers preserves my ability to retrieve relevant information from the latter. I will not be disillusioned with widespread lying to the extent that I cease engagement with all people. Relating this back to grandstanding, awareness of piling on leads to information filtering, which underweights the value of immaterial signalling statements. Thus, not only is public discourse not perverted, but its quality is strengthened as the information-scape is tidied.

Opponents to the passive correction argument, however, might repudiate the awareness assumption in premise 3 by lodging two attacks. The first attack is on the idea that the pervasiveness of grandstanding guarantees awareness. Just because there are many pathological liars does not necessarily mean I know that they exist. I might not have come across one or am simply ignorant about the issue. The second attack is on the presupposition that awareness results in *identification*. People may be disillusioned with grandstanders but still be incapable of spotting one in action. The same pro-climate action statement might stem from people with varying intentions (some more egoistic than others). Furthermore, knowing that reputation is at stake, and being called out for grandstanding only injures it, rational virtue signallers would try their best to conceal their motives (thus hindering identification). Ultimately, to summarise the awareness counterclaims, passive correction cannot transpire if: (i) I am *unaware* of the signalling phenomenon or (ii) I *cannot identify* the grandstander.

Indeed, both are convincing challenges to my position. However, endorsing these counterclaims would also jeopardise Tosi and Warmke's case. Regarding (i), people unaware of the grandstanding circumstance would *not* be cynical about it. How could one have a strong emotional response to a phenomenon that they are oblivious to? The very formation of cynicism requires awareness. Dismantling this premise is like dismissing the fundamental law of gravity in physics—we cannot proceed in the grandstanding debate if not for some baseline assumption. Concerning (ii), a false dichotomy is presented—identification is reduced to a yes/no distinction. Nevertheless, there exists a third possibility: spotting *some* virtue signallers. Linking this point back to Tosi and Warmke, the duo recognises that grandstanders are hard to spot. Despite this, they also contend that identification *is* possible with examples from contemporary US politics (Tosi and Warmke, 2016, pp. 198–199). Along the same vein, my position advocates a scalar notion of grandstander identification. Recognising *some* signalling behaviour (thus passively correcting it) is sufficient to prove that grandstanding does not *always* lead to a perversion of public discourse.

To recap, I have explained how the passive self-correction mechanism (through noise reduction) can bring about a positive impact to public discourse. It is evident in the Pathological Liar example that listeners can isolate statements inconducive to moral discourse while still maintaining engagement. Additionally, I have also addressed the awareness counterclaim and allayed its two-pronged concerns. Regarding the point on pervasive grandstanding not guaranteeing awareness, I have argued that such a foundational assumption is necessary for the grandstanding discourse to unfold. Rejecting this assumption would also cripple Tosi and Warmke's thesis. Moreover, on the link between awareness and identification, I have introduced the scalar notation of spotting grandstanders. Particular cases of well-concealed grandstanders do not preclude the identification of *some* grandstanders. These responses ultimately dispel the awareness counterclaim and point to the plausibility of the passive self-correction argument.

Section IV: The active self-correction argument and its counterclaim

Active self-correction through information verification is the other method listeners use to counteract the injurious effects of grandstanding. In this case, information recipients are likely to actively conduct accountability checks upon receiving information. They might resort to self-initiated research or investigations led by others to probe into the veracity of statements. This type of cross-checking is reconcilable with Tosi and Warmke's analysis too. The duo emphasises that their argument is restricted to discourse in the *public* domain (Tosi and Warmke, 2016, pp. 208–209). Given this public nature of

grandstanding, the probability of information verification increases, as the audience base within the public domain is larger than if grandstanding occurred privately. In fact, as the following case study will show, information authentication promotes the health of public discourse by increasing listener engagement.

The Volkswagen greenwashing incident epitomises the valuable effect of active self-correction. Between 2011 and 2015, Volkswagen attempted to greenwash their brand (i.e. to present the façade of being sustainable) by promoting the idea that their vehicles had extremely low emissions when the opposite was the case (Hotten, 2015). This action is clearly egoistic grandstanding—the company is trying to advance their environmentally reputable image through echoing positions that are favoured by consumers. Because of the public nature of this statement, wary listeners conducted investigations and emission tests that ultimately exposed the scandal (Kretchmer, 2015). The consequence for the grandstander is a hefty fine and damaged reputation (Colvin, 2020). This example illustrates that heightened cynicism *propels* active engagement with grandstanding expressions. Information consumers took the initiative to verify the authenticity of Volkswagen’s claims. Thus, contrary to Tosi and Warmke’s beliefs, excess cynicism may lead to the active correction of grandstanding behaviours and the improvement of the quality of public discourse with extended participation.

Opponents to this contention might target premise 4, which highlights that awareness incites corrective action. They may advance the ideas that (i) awareness simply does not translate into action and (ii) the plethora of information renders active correction impossible. Nonetheless, the two counterclaims are misguided as (i) runs into a contradiction and (ii) is susceptible to the slippery slope fallacy. With regards to the first point, denying that people take action is fundamentally rejecting the very definition of good public discourse. Healthy discourse is concerned with the effective discussion of topics of moral concern (Tosi and Warmke, 2016, p. 198). Given that information verification enables effective debate, it is in the listeners’ interest to do so. The second point, that the sheer amount of information leads to inaction, is too significant a jump. Indeed, manual verification of *all* information in the public domain is time-consuming and near impossible. However, listeners need not cross-check all information. They may opt to prioritise the verification of information produced by *salient* individuals, whose statements carry more influence on the discourse. Linking back to the Volkswagen case, the stature of the corporation no doubt played a role in prompting action. Furthermore, this case is demonstrative of the fact that information consumers *do* actively correct signalling behaviour in practice, despite said challenges to verification.

I have highlighted in this section the importance of information verification in the active self-correction argument. Due to the public nature of grandstanding expressions, statements are more likely to be subjected to checks by the public. As the Volkswagen case illustrates, unsubstantiated claims may be investigated by information consumers. This active and increased participation promotes the quality of public discourse. An opponent to this contention may allude to the disjunction between awareness and action, and the challenges to verifying information that hinder active correction. Nonetheless, I have addressed these concerns by underscoring the implicit contradiction in the prior and the exaggerated causal effect in the latter.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have demonstrated that Tosi and Warmke’s unhealthy cynicism argument is unfounded. Not only does excess cynicism not pervert public discourse but it enhances discussion in some instances. This contention was made possible by firstly examining how grandstanding (through piling on) leads to unhealthy cynicism. Following this, I identified a gap in their definition of *unhealthy* cynicism (which I interpreted as *excess*). Consequently, I was able to illustrate how heightened cynicism reflects awareness of grandstanding behaviour, and how it is plausible that this awareness prompts corrective action due to rational thinking. Once this position was established, I then examined the two forms of self-correction that negate the harmful impacts of grandstanding.

Passive self-correction is one of these two forms and is concerned with reducing noise in the information-scape. Agents might engage in ‘mental handicapping’ by discounting the value of known grandstanding statements. They mentally sequester grandstanders from non-grandstanders and adjust their engagement accordingly. Although opponents raise the awareness counterclaim, citing that not all agents possess awareness and that mere knowledge does not guarantee identification, I have shown that the awareness assumption is critical to the grandstanding literature and that identification rests on a scalar notion. In the active self-correction argument, I presented the possibility that people engage in information verification. The public nature of grandstanding necessitates checks by listeners. Counterclaims that question the link between awareness and action, and the plausibility of information verification are shown to be the victim of contradiction or the slippery slope fallacy. Ultimately, both corrective consequences of amplified cynicism result in improved public discourse outcomes, rendering Tosi and Warmke’s case specious.

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