

Title: Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke, Grandstanding: The Use and Abuse of Moral Talk

Podcast: Half Hour of Heterodoxy

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Transcript

[Welcome to *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, featuring conversations with scholars and authors and ideas from diverse perspectives. Here's your host Chris Martin.]

Chris Martin: Grandstanding: The Use and Abuse of Moral Talk is a new book from philosophers Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke, and I'll be talking to them on today's episode. Their book is about a new construct called moral grandstanding, which differs from virtue signaling and hypocrisy. It describes the use of moral talk to gain status and power. They not only talk about their philosophical work but also about psychological research they've conducted on this topic with Joshua Grubbs, and they explain how grandstanding can degrade our political life.

Your book is called *Moral Grandstanding*. So to begin, can you define what moral grandstanding is and how it differs from say, hypocrisy?

Justin Tosi: Sure. Moral grandstanding is the use of public discourse or discussions of morality and politics for self-promotion. So people who enter the public square, enter discussions about hot button issues like immigration or political issues, gerrymandering, they enter those discussions to gain status. They are not principally interested in helping others. They are primarily in it for themselves. They are looking to gain prestige. They are looking to dominate others.

So grandstanders treat public discourse as a vanity project. And how does this differ from hypocrisy, well – I mean in the book, we argue that grandstanders may actually believe what they say and they may actually be good people. They may actually be really morally impressive. And so, someone need not be a hypocrite in order to grandstand.

What grandstanders are after public discourse is trying to show off. They are trying to use their moral discourse to impress other people. Sometimes they maybe hypocrites, sometimes they might not.

Brandon Warmke: A lot of people have probably heard the term virtue signaling. So people will accuse one another of virtue signaling online. I think often when people say that, they mean just what we are talking about grandstanding. But I think they also often run in ideas that are kind of frequent companions to grandstanding but not necessarily in every case. So a lot of times, people think that when you are grandstanding, what you are saying is just cheap talk. It's insincere. It's purely posturing.

But we think it's a mistake to think that that's characteristic of the phenomenon. Actually, we think that there are important psychological features of human beings that make us sort of move our moral views subtly and so we end up saying things that we might not have started out believing and that some people will find maybe hard to believe that someone actually thinks the things that they are saying.

But in fact, people are sincere when they say these things and the fact that they are sincere causes still more problems. So in other words, grandstanders are not necessarily hypocrites. They are very often sincere, and the fact that they are sincere is worrisome.

Chris Martin: So you point out that grandstanders often think they are more moral than they are. You talk about the literature and psychology around our tendency when it comes to broad categories to think we are above average. And since everyone does that, how is it that not everyone is a moral grandstander?

Brandon Warmke: Yeah, it's a nice question. So think about phenomena like bragging. I think most of us – if what the psychologists tell us is correct that most of us think we are better than average in lots of things and that it's important to us that other people have an impression of us as being better than average and we often go out of our way to manage those impressions. I think most of us at least throughout life have maybe a low level desire, sort of a background desire to want others to think well of us.

But that doesn't mean that everything I say is bragging, right? I mean bragging is a unique phenomenon. Just because I want someone to think well of me when I say something doesn't mean that I'm bragging.

So the thought is, is that in order to grandstand or to brag or to demagogue or to lie, the desire, say to deceive or impress others has to be significant. It has to be an important and significant motivator of what you do. So I think you're right that a lot of what we do is motivated at least in part by a desire to seek status or a desire to impress others.

But oftentimes, because these desires are weak, we are able to not act on them. I mean I might want at dinner someone to know how much money I make. It's not much by the way. But someone at dinner – I might want someone to know how much money I make. But because the desire is fairly weak, I'm able to sort of overcome it and keep my mouth shut.

And the thought is something like, look, we all have a desire to impress others or want others to think well of us, at least usually, but when those desires are sort of weak and in the background, when we engage in public discourse, we are able to sort of overcome them and not act on them. But when those desires are very strong, that's when we will be most liable to grandstanding.

So our view is that not just that – our account of grandstanding is very simple. It just says, "Grandstanding involves saying something in public discourse, say, about morality or politics, out of a strong desire to impress others with your moral qualities." And that strong desire bit is

really important. It's not that every single desire to impress others means that we are grandstanding, it means that you have to really engage in this behavior intending to seek status.

Justin Tosi: Yes. So if you want a quick takeaway, in the book, we talk about a simple test you can run on yourself to figure out if you are likely grandstanding. So if you are about to say something about some moral or political issue, ask yourself, "Okay, supposed I say this and it turns out nobody is impressed, nobody thinks any better of me at all," if your reaction to imagining that state of affair is disappointment, if you think, "Oh man, that sucks." That suggests you're really hoping to get something out of it and that you are going to grandstand.

And so we say, if that's your reaction to running this disappointment test in yourself, maybe you should think about whether it's worth saying.

Chris Martin: So in other words, if you are moralizing with humility then you are definitely not grandstanding? If you are a truly humble person, would that be fair?

Justin Tosi: There are lots of philosophical puzzles about modesty. Now, it depends on what you want, right? So if you think like, "What I want is for other people to be impressed with my having any virtue," then yeah, you are grandstanding. So I think just the fact that it's about something that some trait that suggests you wouldn't be a grandstander, that doesn't mean you can't grandstand about it. It might just mean you don't actually have that trait.

Chris Martin: And you point out in the first chapter too that one prominent example of moral grandstanding in a public sphere is the moral majority in the 1990s I think was their heyday although they are still – they do still exist. What are some examples of grandstanding now in the 2010s and I guess we are in 2020 now so the 2020s that you think are prominent and bothersome?

Brandon Warmke: Yeah, it's an interesting feature of I think contemporary discourse in the culture wars that when people talk about grandstanding or virtue signaling, what they tend to think of are accusations against the left, the political left coming from the political right. And so, Justin and I have been unwillingly conscripted into the cultural wars by certain academics. And when we talk about this in public venues ...

Chris Martin: That might be lucrative.

[Laughter]

Brandon Warmke: We are not going to sell our souls.

Justin Tosi: Not yet.

Brandon Warmke: Not yet.

Justin Tosi: It hasn't been lucrative yet.

Brandon Warmke: That's true. So a lot of people want to conscript the project, the book, into the cultural wars and make it – well, this – here are these two heterodox philosophers trying to undermine the moral discourse say of the left. And there are a couple of things to say about that. One is, as you rightly mentioned, if you sort of flip back the pages of recent at least US history, you can see that kind of high-minded moral talk or moral grandstanding is not one-sided. I mean like you mentioned, you think back to the '80s to the moral majority, you think back to sort of McCarthyism and the Red Scare, you think back to all the moralizing about the Iraq war, all the moralizing about Bill Clinton in the '90s and being fit for office. And so, it would be an interesting sociological or sort of historical question why these trends seem to bounce back and forth from the right and the left. I mean I think it is truly – there is a perception now that the left is sort of moral grandstanding than the right.

However, with a colleague of mine at Bowling Green in the Psychology Department, Joshua Grubbs, we've teamed up and we've ran over the past couple of years about six studies with 6,000 participants and we created the grandstanding scale. And what we found is that as best as we can tell, motivations to grandstand both for what we call prestige and what we call dominance, both of these phenomena are equally bipartisan. So we don't find any more inclination on the left to use public discourse to show off moral equalities than on the right.

However, we do find that the further you get out on the extremes on both sides, people are more likely to grandstand. So – and in fact, this is some partial evidence we have that grandstanding might be leading to ideological and effective polarization is that people who tend to do more of the grandstanding appear to be on the very far political right and the very far political left.

Chris Martin: So if you are politician, you're seeking public office, do you think you have to engage in some degree of grandstanding not just moral but to general grandstanding in several spheres just to be an inspiring figure? Because you can't entirely campaign just on the basis of policy statements.

Justin Tosi: Yeah, that's a great question and we have a whole chapter just on the grandstanding of politicians in the book. So our general line is that grandstanding among politicians is to be expected because people demand it. So it's largely a demand side phenomenon.

So the mechanism here is people care about the character of their representatives, of the politicians that they vote for. So they want to see that they are voting for someone who is a good person. So why did they do this? Well, because it's sort of heuristic for them. It's a lot easier to see if someone is the kind of person who cares about people like you than it is to learn about all their policies and whether they will work. So people kind of take the shortcut. They say, "Is this the kind of person I would want to have a beer with? Does he care about people like me? Does he care about my interests? And if he does, then I'll vote for him."

So politicians of course know this. They know that what the public wants is a morality pageant from them so that's what we get. So we get people putting on a show for us, claiming to care a lot about our plate and politics is – well, it's dysfunctional for a lot of reasons but this is one of

the reasons that it's sort of dysfunctional is that we get politicians proposing nice-sounding policies that do nothing more really than sound nice. So they sound nice and they don't work.

Chris Martin: So your argument that moral grandstanding is bad mainly because it's empty and a form of ostentation?

Brandon Warmke: So we have in the book, we have three separate chapters arguing for three broadly different reasons that moral grandstanding is bad and to be avoided. And I'll just give you a brief overview of those. So we have – we have a chapter arguing that grandstanding has negative social consequences. So it promotes polarization. It increases cynicism about public discourse and it reduces the viable signal that emotions that outrage have in public discourse. S

So one way to think about the badness of the moral grandstanding is simply in virtue of the consequences. It reduces the social currency of public discourse. It makes it harder to have conversations about important moral and political issues.

In another chapter, we argue that grandstanding is a – it's a form of disrespect. We give various arguments for this. But one way to think about it is, if you are using public discourse to – this is especially the case if you think about like shaming, pile-ons that we have all seen on public discourse.

People using others merely as an instrument to make themselves look good by piling on shame and outrage and trying to get people fired and so on, that's not what public discourse is for. That's a show of disrespect. And so we think that for that reason and a few others, regardless of the consequences, it's disrespectful to treat other people in moral discourse simply as an audience or a target of your anger just to make yourself look good.

In the final chapter, we argue that it's not morally good for someone's character to grandstand, that grandstanding is not good evidence of a high moral character. And we give several arguments for this. One of them comes from 19th century philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. And the basic argument there is that look, morality – whatever morality is for and we actually disagree with Nietzsche about what morality is for, but whatever morality is for, here is what it's not for. Morality is not a tool that you should use in your desire to seek power over others. So Nietzsche called the will to power, all trying to overcome obstacles to be excellent people and we agree that we should try to be virtuous, excellent people.

But that's not what morality is for. Like moral discourse and moral talk, moral blame, moral arguments, the purpose of these things is not to gain status and dominate other people. And this way, we agree Nietzsche that using morality this way is a kind of trick, is a kind of dominance ploy to overcome other people's resistance to us. It's pathetic. I mean this is just not what a morally good person would use morality for.

So in those three chapters, we argue that for a variety of reasons, we think moral grandstanding is bad and to be avoided.

Justin Tosi: Yeah. So to back up just for one moment, one thing that we see people who talk about grandstanding and virtue signaling get really wrong. And one thing that we want to correct with this book is that people will level these accusations these days against any moral claim at all. So any instance of someone saying, “This is unjust. The right thing to do here is X.” They will say, “Grandstanding, virtue signaling, everybody ignore this. This is garbage.”

So we think that’s just a mistake. So if you will notice, we are making moral arguments in this book. We think morality is a good thing. And moral talk is part of – well, moral talk is the way primarily that we advance the cause of morality in the world. So the worry about grandstanding and virtue signaling is that it’s a misuse of this project. So far from thinking that we want all of these moral appeals out of public discourse, we want people to take moral talk seriously. And one of the big problems with grandstanding is that it’s an abuse of moral talk. It leads people to be cynical about moral talk. So we want to do something about that.

Chris Martin: So do you feel like you can judge accurately when someone is engaging in grandstanding? To give you an example, it may seem that someone is overly passionate and overly ostentatious about an issue but then you may find that it’s because that personally it has affected them in the past or has personally affecting them right now and you don’t know that fact about them. So how do you discern whether someone is grandstanding or how do you discern whether you are accurately telling grandstanding apart from other forms of moralizing?

Brandon Warmke: Yeah. This is the 64,000 other question, what does grandstanding look like and how do you identify it?

In the book, we argue, grandstanding is hard. It’s hard to identify and it’s hard to identify for a couple of different reasons. One is, an essential feature of grandstanding is the desire to impress other people and that desire is not transparent to outsiders. I can’t see inside your head and see what’s motivating you.

In this respect, grandstanding is much like lying. I mean the mere fact that someone says something false doesn’t mean they are a liar. Lying requires something like a desire or intention to deceive. And so this is why you don’t go around calling people liars just when they say false things.

And so one reason why grandstanding is often very hard to discern is because people’s desires are not transparent to us. Another reason why grandstanding is hard is to discern is because grandstanding uses what linguists call indirect speech. So it’s very rare for someone who wants to impress other people with their moral talk to just come out and say, “I am the most moral person here. I care most about the family values or justice or whatever.” They use indirect language to hide their true intentions. So you might say something like, “As someone who is long far for family values, I can’t believe someone is actually seriously considering this proposal. It’s 2020. Do better.”

Now, that doesn't clearly assert that I'm a better person than you. But the effect of that is supposed to be upon – to impress upon the audience that I really take family value seriously. But of course, there's possible deniability, right? This is the point of indirect speech.

So for these two reasons, grandstanding is a lot like other phenomena like bragging or lying or demagoguery where it's often not clear to us what someone's true intentions are. Now, we argue in the book, we give field guide for grandstanding. We think there are some common forms that grandstanding takes but that's not a foolproof test. And the upshot of this we think is that the right response to grandstanding is once you learn about it or once you thought deeply about the moral philosophy or psychology involved, the right response is not to like prep your antenna or your radar and try to like find the grandstanders among us and then like call them out. We think that's just not the right way to think about next steps.

We think the right thing to do is to think, “Well, now that I know what grandstanding is, to ask myself when I'm about to contribute to public discourse, why am I doing this? Am I doing this to actually do good or am I doing this to look good?”

And so, we think that there are lots of reasons not to call people out for grandstanding. And one of them just is that it's often very difficult to know whether people are doing it. That's unfair. It's unfair to call people out or blame people for grandstanding just because you don't like what they say or because you suspect they have egoistic motives.

We think the better response is to sort of turn the focus inward and ask, why am I contributing to discourse? Why am I doing this?

Justin Tosi: Yeah, the project of our book is not well-described as grandstanding, how to spot the monsters among us. It's more about convincing people that grandstanding is a real problem. So we meet people all the time. We say, “Oh, people don't do this. And if they do it, it's not a big deal and so on.”

These are the questions we are trying to take on and said they do do it. We can see why from understanding basic findings in psychology. Whatever your moral outlook, whatever your preferred moral theory, grandstanding is not a good thing and we should avoid it and we can all do our part in reducing its role in our public discourse.

Chris Martin: So maybe Justin, you can start with the answer to this one. If moral grandstanding is bad, do you have a formula or technique that you yourself have tried to – when you are trying to confront someone who is engaged in an excessive moral grandstanding?

Justin Tosi: Well, yeah. I have a fool-proof technique.

[Laughter]

Chris Martin: Just to walk away?

Justin Tosi: Yeah. I mean yeah, exactly. I ignore it. So look, whenever we become aware of bad behavior, I think it's really natural for us to want to blame people for it, to say, "Hey, you are doing this thing. It's wrong and you need to cut it out." But grandstanding unfortunately is we think a case where that approach just doesn't work very well because largely, our motivations are hidden from each other so we can't ever even if we are very confident that someone is grandstanding, we can never show to anyone's satisfaction in public or have someone dead to rights say, "This person is grandstanding."

So what should you do? So don't call people out. We think. That's not a good idea. You will just then get an argument about that person's intentions and what's in their heart and that's not really a good thing to talk about in public usually. People will just accuse you of grandstanding because they don't understand what it is and they just want to twist the knife.

So what you should do is ignore people who are doing it. Don't support politicians who just look good in publicity stunts. Don't like your annoying friend's post. Don't comment on it. Don't argue with them. Just ignore. And the hope is, that once people stop getting rewarded for grandstanding, once the incentive to do so is removed or at least lessened then people will cut it out or at least do it less often.

But what you can do if you are looking for something more positive is to try not to grandstand yourself. So ask yourself. We said a few times, "Am I doing this to look good or to do good?" And if you find yourself thinking like, "If I really look at myself hard in the mirror and I think, ah, I just want my friends to know I'm on their side and I'm one of the good guys." Then maybe it's time to step back and find something else to do.

Chris Martin: Do you have anything to add, Brandon, in terms of techniques to confront more grandstanders?

Brandon Warmke: No. I mean I think that Justin has got it right. I mean one thing that we mentioned in the book is simply – is trying to make grandstanding rassing. And one way to do that is just try to set a good example for yourself. So focus on not drawing attention to yourself.

One thing that a lot of grandstanders do is a lot of the discussions involved coincidentally themselves, right? As someone who has long fought for the poor, as someone who has long fought for family values. They tend to make the more discourse about themselves. But as we argue throughout the book, moral discourse is – it's not really the place to sort of not generally anyway, not really the place to sort of push your brand, to push yourself. It's a collaborative project.

And so, one way to try to make grandstanding embarrassing is to first, set an example for yourself when you engage in moral or political discourse, try to focus on yourself. Try to focus on what's the relevant evidence, what are the relevant issues at stake, who are the relevant experts that we should pay attention to.

And the other thing is, when people do – when people do engage in behavior that you think you might suspect as grandstanding, one thing to do is just to affirm them and say, “I see that you really care about this. I think that’s really great that this is important to you and I’d like to have a conversation about ...” and then you point to some substantial issue. So to not make it about them because it’s really painful to have someone attack you in public discourse, I think we’ve all probably experienced that, and to try to pull away from making these conversations so deeply personal that people can detach their own feelings and have a conversation about the substantive issues.

Chris Martin: So in chapter 2 of the book, you do jump from – you jump to the topic of the need for belonging and how sometimes people engage in moralizing even if they don’t believe in something as a moral issue just to belong. And in psychology, that’s actually a jump because people usually think of the need for status as a one need and the need for belongingness a different need. Now when it comes to belonging, that’s more of a deprivation need so if you have too little belonging then you’re ostracized which can be painful.

So on the flipside, do you think people need to engage in some degree of moral grandstanding just to belong? I mean if you – do you feel like if you move to a foreign country and then at least to some degree pretend to buy into the morals of that culture?

And I’m asking because in my personal experience, I moved from – so when I was very young, I lived in Saudi Arabia which is a very moral, religious country in one sense. Then I moved to India. My family was Catholic so I didn’t feel like I understood Hindu values per se but I have to honor those values to some degree. And then I moved to America. So I have this experience of faking belief and morals just to fit into a culture.

So, how much of that is forgivable?

Brandon Warmke: Yeah, Justin, how much of that is forgivable?

[Laughter]

Justin Tosi: Well, there’s a lot going on in that question. So I guess – one thing to keep in mind is we don’t have a general theory in this book of like moral fakery. We are talking primarily about talk. So when you have people actually, acting, we think the stakes changed a lot in ways that are hard to make general claims about in the way that we are in the book.

But one general thing that I will say is that although we think that grandstanding, so using moral talk for self-promotion and like gaining status, it’s always bad in itself. It’s sometimes the best thing that you can do. So that is you might just be in a bad situation or a situation where more important things are at stake and it just is worth it all things considered morally to engage in moral grandstanding. So that might sound sort of paradoxical.

But if you think about it, this is in general how morality works. And so, you can think killing an innocent human being, that’s always bad. That’s never a good thing to do. But sometimes the

stars aligned and you have no choice but to avoid even worse moral outcomes, you have no choice but to kill an innocent person. So you can say the same thing about lying, about stealing.

And so, grandstanding works in exactly the same way. It's not ideal, not a good thing, but it could work out. It could work out at least sometimes to be the right thing to do.

Chris Martin: So what are your next projects here? Are you planning to do more empirical research on moral grandstanding with Josh Grubbs?

Brandon Warmke: Yeah. We are in the midst of a pretty long term longitudinal study on moral grandstanding. We published our first empirical paper December 2019 showing – well, evaluating the original grandstanding scale and then showing that motivations to grandstand seem to be a good predictor of interpersonal conflict.

And then we have a second paper out. It's under review now showing the relationship between grandstanding and civic engagement. We just send off a paper with Josh last week showing that grandstanding seems to be driving both effective and ideological polarization.

Chris Martin: And by effective, you mean just like liking and disliking of people and groups?

Brandon Warmke: Yup. Yeah. How you feel – how would you feel if your daughter married someone of the opposing political party and so on?

Justin Tosi: Yeah, feeling thermometer stuff.

Brandon Warmke: Yeah. I think long term – so the book with Justin is it draws a lot on the empirical work but not mainly the work that we've done with Josh. I think in the long term, we would probably like to talk to Josh about, Josh maybe hearing this for the first time on this podcast, like to write a book with Josh about the science of grandstanding. So that's sort of one part of the project of grandstanding.

Justin and I are writing another book right now. We just started. It's called Why It's Okay to Mind Your Own Business. And that's just a book on social morality. It's a book. It's kind of an anti-commencement speech book. A lot of commencement speakers say, "Get out there and change the world, and every problem is your problem, and be a moral busy buddy and solve the world's problems." And in our book, we kind of say it's okay to ignore all that advice and devote yourself to your local community and your friends and become a good person. And so, it's kind of telling people that it's okay to ignore all that high-minded advice that they hear at graduation and carry on as normal.

Chris Martin: So an argument from a moral modesty?

Brandon Warmke: Yeah, yeah.

Justin Tosi: In part, yeah.

Brandon Warmke: Yeah.

Justin Tosi: Yeah. So it's a way of saying like, "Look, I mean it's great. If you want to support a charity that fights malarial infections, that's awesome. That's a really good thing." But you know what? It's sort of overrated at least relative to a lot of things that people sort of take for granted and don't think of as morally significant projects like just being a good father or mother even, helping your kid to read – learn how to read. That's a morally important project. So it's not as if the only way you do good is by doing these big like global interventions. You can also be a good person by just helping out the people close to you and just living a good life, pursuing interesting knowledge, trying to achieve worthwhile things in your career. These are all things that are not to be sort of poo-pooed morally.

Brandon Warmke: Yeah. Our next-door neighbors might love this book but philosophers aren't going to like it.

Justin Tosi: Oh, they're going to hate it so much. Yeah.

Chris Martin: Yeah. Well, I do think if you take Aristotle seriously and maybe you think of engaging your capacities, if you have the capacity to engage in a project like eradicating malaria then that is probably what you should do. If your highest capacity is to be a good parent then maybe that's what you should do. So it's partly self-knowledge that's I think at stake.

Brandon Warmke: Yeah.

Chris Martin: You need to figure out what's right for you given your capacities.

Brandon Warmke: Yeah. A good life is about choosing well among all of the things that matter, so yeah.

Chris Martin: Great. Well, it has been great having both of you on the show. Thank you for joining for the show.

Justin Tosi: Yeah.

Brandon Warmke: Thanks for having us, Chris. Appreciate it.

Justin Tosi: Thanks a lot, Chris. Yeah, this is really fun.

Chris Martin: You can find Justin and Brandon's book *Moral Grandstanding* at bookstores everywhere and you can also find a short talk about this book on YouTube at the Big Think channel. There's also a talk by Justin Tosi on Wrath in the seven deadly sins series at the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Public Affairs channel.

This will be our last episode before we go on an indefinite break. I hope you enjoyed listening to the show over the past three years. I've enjoyed seeing your reviews on iTunes and hearing from many of over email or in person.

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