Moral Grandstanding with Brandon Warmke

Christiane Wisehart, host and producer: I'm Christiane Wisehart. And this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, The Zeppelin]

Christiane: We're talking about the ethics of talking about ethics today on the show. With me to discuss moral discourse is Brandon Warmke, who has co-written a book called *Moral Grandstanding: The Use and Abuse of Moral Talk*. He argues that discussions about morals and ethics are valuable social resources.

Brandon Warmke: It's how we solve problems. It's how we identify who's to be trusted, who's not to be trusted. It's how we alert other people to injustices. It's a crucial way for us to live life together and to make the world a better place.

Christiane: Stay tuned for my interview with Brandon Warmke on today's episode of Examining Ethics.

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Christiane: I'm what you might call an avid social media lurker--if it's even possible to be an "avid" lurker. I don't reply to Twitter threads, I don't use the duet feature on TikTok. I do that thing that probably terrifies sociologists and psychologists and I just scroll, scroll, scroll, reading and watching and listening to what people are saying about politics and culture and kittens.

In the last few years, I've noticed that people are more and more apt to make bold pronouncements, announcing their take on this issue or that one. And that's part of what keeps me scrolling. I like hearing other people's views on things, and sometimes I appreciate it when those views are laid out clear as crystal. I didn't really think to question these bold statements. That is, until I spoke with our guest today.

Brandon Warmke has written a book that examines this recent turn towards big, unapologetic statements. He's a philosopher at Bowling Green State University and with Justin Tosi has co-written a book called *Moral Grandstanding: The Use and Abuse of Moral Talk*. In it, they explore the way people talk about morality on social media, in the news and in other spaces. I spoke with Brandon in April of 2020.

[interview begins]

Christiane: I do just want to note that we are recording this in odd times, so I do want to note the date. It's April 8th and we are recording this in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. I think

your book-- it could be pretty relevant for thinking through some...some moral issues around the coronavirus. But before we get started on any of that, I just wanted you to give me super quick definition of moral grandstanding. We can get into the details later.

Brandon Warmke:

Moral grandstanding is the use of public discourse for self-promotion. So people who engage in grandstanding are using their discussion of morality and politics to try to impress people with their moral qualities. They treat public discourse as a kind of vanity project. So, they might get on Twitter or on Facebook, or you can imagine politicians in a stump speech, trying to impress upon people how much they care about family values or about the poor. Moral grandstanders are people who use public discourse as a way to gain social status.

Christiane:

Once you read your, your summary at the beginning of your book you can start to see it everywhere. So I thought maybe we could do something a little fun, which is you could give me an example of moral grandstanding on the fly maybe. You and your co-author, you try to differentiate between moral grandstanding, which you seem to think is kind of bad or harmful, and moral talk, which you say can be good and productive. So I'm going to give you a headline, and I want you to tweet back at us an example of a moral talk response to that headline and then a grandstanding response to that headline. So the headline, and this is from *The New York Times*, this is from early April 2020: “28 Texas Students Have Coronavirus After Spring-Break Trip.”

Brandon Warmke:

It's very hard to discern whether someone is grandstanding simply by looking at what they say. The reason is because an essential part of grandstanding is a desire or a motivation. And those things are in your head, and those things are not often--always certainly--transparent to people when they're simply looking at what you write.

So, in this respect, we compare grandstanding to things like bragging or lying or demagoguery where each of those phenomena, you know, require some kind of mental state, like a desire, seeking to impress someone. And so it's possible for the very same sentence to be say tweeted. In one case it could be grandstanding, in another case it could be something else, just simply an innocent contribution to moral discourse. And again, similarly with lying, right? I could say something and it could be a lie, and you could say the exact same thing and it would not be a lie for you, right?

So, all that being said as a bit of like a background, it's very hard to identify grandstanding just by looking at it. Okay. So back to the challenge here. Someone might say something like, "Oh, this is really unfortunate. These people are potentially spreading illnesses that will affect their parents and grandparents." That's a very milquetoast and boring moral statement, but I think it qualifies as something like moral talk. Like "Oh, this is a bad thing. Maybe they don't know this. Maybe they are to be blamed for this behavior."

Grandstanding. Let's see. Someone might say something like, "I am absolutely disgusted that these millennials have so little regard for their elders that they would prioritize having fun over family values. Do better." That might be grandstanding.

Christiane:
How the heck are we supposed to tell the difference between grandstanding and moral talk?

Brandon Warmke:
Justin Tosi and I have paired up with a psychologist, Joshua Grubbs. We've embarked on a large empirical research project on grandstanding. So, you know, we have pretty good evidence--empirical evidence--that people do use public discourse to self-promote. We know it happens. We also know it can be very difficult to identify it. This leaves us in a messy situation. Not every contribution to moral discourse and moral talk...

We use the term moral talk just to pick out people discussing morality and politics, what's right and wrong, who should be blamed, who should be praised, who are the good people, who are the bad people. Moral discourse is an extremely valuable social resource. It's how we solve problems. It's how we identify who's to be trusted, who's not to be trusted. It's how we alert other people to injustices. It's a crucial way for us to live life together and to make the world a better place. And in our view, moral grandstanding is a way to abuse that tool. It turns this protective instrument and perverts it and distorts it into a vanity project.

It dilutes the power and it dilutes the force of moral discourse by making it something that is about the speaker. Yes, grandstanding is hard to detect. In a way, it should be hard to detect because grandstanders, the way that they're successful is by saying things that leave them plausible deniability. If you just came out and said in a public discourse, "I'm the most enlightened person here. Everyone listen to me," no one's going to be taken in by the act, right?

Grandstanding is a bit like humble bragging because it cloaks this egoistic self-interested behavior in moral language that makes it look like people are seriously concerned for others. There's a kind of deception involved in grandstanding. This is why grandstanding is often hard to detect because people are using this indirect language to induce people to believe things about them.

Christiane:
I struggled while I was reading your book because I just kept thinking what's the harm? What's the harm in using a rhetoric flourish here, some strong words there? But then the more I thought about it, I thought, well, that's the ethics question, right? What harm does grandstanding do?

Brandon Warmke:
I mean, I think your reaction is a common and understandable reaction. I think many people respond to grandstanding as sort of like, okay, maybe it's a little bad, but it's mostly innocuous. People who complain about it are the really bad people, right? It's the people who are accusing

people of grandstanding. It's people like me and Tosi who are writing books about grandstanding. We're the really bad guys. We describe grandstanding as a quiet poison.

It's not easily detectable, but it's no less poisonous. One of the chapters in the book is on the social harms or the social consequences of grandstanding. So one of the harms of grandstanding is we argue that it's polarization. If you think about how a lot of grandstanding works, it functions as a kind of moral arm's race or a moral one-upsmanship. This has to do with certain psychological ingredients that have to do with trying to impress other people.

If I think of myself as caring deeply for the poor and you announced that you support a $15 minimum wage, then if it's really important to me that people think of me as caring deeply for the poor and I want other people to think the same, I have two options. I can either be quiet and let them think that you really care about the poor, or I can chime in and try to outdo you. I can say, "If you really cared about the poor, you'd be supportive of a $20 minimum wage."

You can imagine this sort of dynamic playing out over and over again on both sides of the political aisle. When it comes to gun control, when it comes to immigration, when it comes to same-sex marriage, whatever the issue, you can imagine there's a kind of push towards the extremes to outdo one another. In some of our empirical evidence, we found that the people who grandstand the most are the most politically polarized. There's some evidence that grandstanding is actually pushing people apart. This happens because of these psychological dynamics at play in trying to convince other people that you're morally impressive.

Now, you might think that polarization is not a big problem and that moving to extreme views is not a problem. Extreme views aren't false just because they're extreme. Think about it this way. Grandstanding in a moral arms race is not a reliable way to discover what's true. If people were actually taking more extreme views because they were convinced by argument or empirical evidence or something, that would be reason to think, well, maybe polarization at least on one side is not that bad because they're "polarizing" because of evidence.

But what happens in grandstanding is the mechanism is not pointed at truth. It's pointed at impressing people. The incentives are to arrive at beliefs such that moving any more to the extreme would start impressing people. Grandstanding is not what we would describe as a truth-sensitive or truth-tracking mechanism. It's not a reliable way of discovering the truth. To point those two points together, grandstanding causes polarization. Grandstanding driven polarization is not a reliable way of arriving at the truth.

In our view, what's happening at least in lots of quarters of online discourse is you have people on both sides polarizing and polarizing for not rational reasons, right? They’re reasons having to do with impressing people. That's going to make governing hard. It's going to make compromise difficult. It's going to give us a bunch of false beliefs about morality and politics.

We think grandstanding because of these subtle psychological mechanisms that occur in discourse is going to have this effect.

Christiane:

For me, I'll just give an example for myself, which is that, like I said, I lurk a lot on Twitter. And a lot of times the more radical statements and the more uncomfortable they make me feel a lot of times that kind of guides me... embracing that discomfort or at least examining that discomfort, that kind of guides into what I hope is a more nuanced view, right? It helps me kind of sort of the gray areas. I guess what's the harm in something being polarizing or discomfort causing?

Brandon Warmke:

One harm would be if the polarization was leading people to have false beliefs or to hold beliefs not on the basis of good evidence. If you think of the mechanism of grandstanding-driven polarization as simply being or largely being publicly adopting views that other people are impressed by, that's not a...I don't want to live in a society where our politicians or our journalists or the huge accounts on Twitter are adopting moral and political views because they think it's going to impress people. That would be a big harm. Now, the thing that you mentioned is, well, look, seeing these extreme views is good because they help me think through my own views. On that, I absolutely agree. I mean, this is in a way a point that John Stuart Mill makes, 19th-century philosopher in his little book on liberty, he says it's important to see a diverse set of views because it, he says, it strengthens your own view of the truth, right?

If you have the truth, you can see more vividly why your beliefs are true in light of other views. Maybe even really extreme, wild, false views. But he also says that, and I think this is what you have in mind, he says being exposed to these very different views is good for us because we might have to give up our own views for views that we think are better. Now, what Mill has in mind there is something like, well, I should consider these other views because they could be true, or they might have evidence, or that I might have false beliefs that I haven't based on sufficient evidence. That I absolutely agree with. I think that's a very nice way of putting the thought and the value of seeing extreme views.

What Justin and I worry about is the extent to which people take positions in public, and there's empirical evidence. I mean, we know that people endorse views in public that they don't actually believe. They do this to avoid social sanction. They do it to avoid embarrassment, and they do it to project an image of themselves. What we worry about is people on social media taking views, endorsing positions, A, that they don't really believe, and B, whether they believe it or not, doing it largely because they think people will be impressed by it. That we think is not the kind of society we'd want to live in.

Christiane:

You said that you had a couple of other harms that come from grandstanding.

Brandon Warmke:

One of them is a kind of cynicism about moral discourse. There's a kind of boy crying wolf effect going on here. When you discover that people engage in public discourse, that lots of people are trying to make themselves look good. I mean, we know that people brag. We know that people humble brag.

It's nothing new. Once you see that this is what people are out to do, I think it's very easy to become cynical about public discourse because you look at what's going on and you say, "These people don't care. They don't really care about the truth.

They don't really care about compromise. They don't really care about the public good. They don't really care at arriving at a nuanced position about rent control. They just want to gain social status. They want to seek prestige. They want to dominate their rivals and humiliate them. They want to use outrage to look good and feel good." Once you see that, you think public discourse is just a nasty place of people trying to impress others and I don't want a part of it. We have this very important resource, public discourse, and then you have people using it for selfish ends.

One worry is just that once a discourse is saturated with grandstanding, people realize this and they check out. We don't want people to be across board cynical about public discourse because, as I mentioned earlier, it's a really valuable resource. I mean, this is how we solve problems. The more people who check out, the more people who don't take these conversations seriously, that's bad.

The third thing is what we call outrage exhaustion, and the idea is that a lot of grandstanding does involve excessive emotional reports or displays like, "I'm absolutely sickened, or I am disgusted. And so, a lot of what we know about how outrage is expressed in public discourse from the psychologists, we know that people express outrage to alleviate guilt. We know that people express outrage to make themselves feel good. A couple of philosophers, Thi Nguyen and Bekka Williams, have a nice paper called “Moral Outrage Porn,” in which they argue, and there's empirical evidence for this too, that people express outrage because it feels good. This other thing we know is that people express outrage because it's a reliable signal of moral conviction, right? Grandstanders can exploit the signal and basically say, "I'm an extremely morally sensitive person. I have lots of important moral convictions and lots of things outrage me."

The problem is what we call outrage exhaustion. There's two parts of the problem. One is we dilute the signal that outrage sends, right? If I get as angry about what Oberlin College is serving in their dining hall or Halloween costumes or if I get outraged that we can't have the 10 Commandments in a park, if I get as outraged at those things as I do about world historic injustices, then I diluted the signal that my outrage sends, right? I've simply communicated to people that I have one setting and that's 11 and my outrage is 11 for everything. There's no differentiation between the things that are really worth getting outraged about and the things that are maybe less important.

When you use outrage to feel good, when you use outrage to impress other people, you lose a sense of being able to muster the outrage when it's really called for, right? If you're using outrage for things like the promotion of your reputation, I mean, we know that the way emotions work, it's going to be harder to muster the outrage when it's really called for. Our view is that outrage is really important. I mean, we're not anger deniers or anger skeptics. Outrage is a

really reliable signal. But when everything is a condition or source for outrage, you dilute that signal. Those are two other problems. One is the cynicism about public discourse and then the outrage exhaustion.

Christiane:

A lot of moral grandstanding, as you note, takes place on social media. It takes place in something called the attention economy, right, where it's really hard to get your content or your words or your pictures noticed these days. Is somebody blameworthy for taking part in that, right? If I really care about public health, wouldn't it be a good idea for me to signal myself as somebody who cares a lot about public health and you should listen to me about public health?

Brandon Warmke:

There's a couple of issues there. One is the attention economy. I think you're right. I joined Twitter I guess it was like the fall of 2000... December of 2018. I knew I had this book coming out and I was like, well, it's time to... The irony is that it's time to self-promote. It's time to promote the book. I realized need to get a bunch of followers now because I got to promote the book, right?

What I discovered pretty early on is that if you're pretty boring and milquetoast, no one cares. The way to get attention on Twitter... One way to get attention, there's lots of ways, but one of them is to be excessive, to is to stand out. You have something to sell, you've got a point to make, you want people to listen to you, have a hot take.

So what's wrong with that? Well, again, let's think about public discourse as a kind of resource. It's a common resource that we all have in common. Think about like a park or a pasture that we all share that we want to protect. To protect that public resource, we all have to sort of sublimate our own... To some extent, sublimate our own selfish desires or uses of that resource so that we protect it for everyone. If I'm out there using public discourse in ways that are not protective of the public good for everyone, I'm in a way degrading the value of that resource for everyone else. I'm making it less valuable for everyone else.

Your question was, why are people blameworthy who abuse this resource? I think one way to think about it they are privileging themselves in a context in which the right thing to do many times is to protect the resource for everyone, right? I can't go around just doing whatever is always best for me. You sublimate your own desires for the good of other people. We think this is just a feature of civic virtue. People who have civic virtue prioritize the public good over their own.

Christiane:

How is it possible to have a productive moral conversation in the attention economy?

Brandon Warmke:

What we want is to instill a belief in people, instill in people a way of thinking about public discourse that follows certain kinds of norms. Here's a norm we argue for in the book. Don't use public discourse for self-promotion. Make it embarrassing to do anything that might look like

grandstanding. If you can figure out how to get people to think differently about public discourse, then we have a shot.

But it might be that if people are entering discourse largely to seek status, we don't have a chance. But the key is to change norms, to get people to think differently about how they contribute, but this is not about me. Another way to do it is to change norms so that the way to get status is to be nuanced and careful and boring. But, that's hard to imagine.

Christiane:

I mean, my next question was, if we want to avoid grandstanding, how can we do that?

Brandon Warmke:

A couple things we recommend in the book. Engineer your situations. I mean, one of the findings of 20th-century psychology that's pretty robust is that situations plays a large role in our behavior. If we are able to identify the situations in which we know we are going to be tempted to prove to other people how good we are, try to set ourselves up for success before that temptation becomes overwhelming. That might mean limiting your time online. One trick I use too much is I'll type something and then I'll save it as a draft or I'll just walk away, then I'll come back 15 minutes later and just, "Ah, whatever. I won't post that." You can sort of rearrange your situation such that it's more conducive to making good choices.

Another thing we suggest is, look, this recognition desire that you mentioned, which is part of grandstanding that we want to seek status and want to impress others, the thought is that we can redirect that desire to more productive ends. We don't think it's wrong to want to have status. One question is, well, how do we more productively satisfy that desire for status? If people really are out for social status and to make themselves look good morally, there are ways to do that that are more productive than cheap talk online, which is like if you really want people to be impressed, go to a soup kitchen and take a photo of yourself at the soup kitchen and post it online.

At least that way, if you're getting kudos for it, you've also done something good, right? I mean, overall you're probably doing more good than just some cheap talk online. There are lots of people who can use our help. If what's really important to us is the reputation and status, at least we can sort of redirect that desire to more productive ends.

The other thing that we recommend is just to encourage people to think of moral discourse as a resource and to think about about, like, are we pouring toxic poison into it or are we actually using it for productive ends?

Christiane:

Why do you care about this?

Brandon Warmke:

Justin Tosi, my co-author, and I, we started working on this project in about 2014. We both noticed in being online... What appeared to us to be like a shift in how people treated public discourse. It looked to us like there was just a lot of nasty talk. A lot of this nastiness seemed to be self-serving. I think a lot of people then and now think of public discourse, they think of moral talk as kind of like magic. As long as you're wrapping up your selfishness or your dominance of other people, as long as you're wrapping it in a kind of moral veneer, then anything goes.

And I think what really concerns Justin and I is that this is not what morality is for. Morality is not to... Nietzsche pointed this out. I mean, this is a tradition that goes back... I mean, I think Jesus says things like this. Nietzsche clearly says things like this. One thing he thought was that morality is not a convenient way to dominate others, to exercise what we called will to power. For us, it's a concern about morality itself, that people seem to think that morality offers an excuse or a means to satisfy their will to power, satisfy their desires for social status. We think it's not just an abuse of moral talk, but more broadly, it's abuse of morality. That's not what morality is for, right? Morality is not there to make yourself look good. It's not there to dominate and humiliate other people because you enjoy seeing them brought low. That's not what morality is for. What is morality for? Well, that's a difficult question. But I think for us, what motivates at least my... Since he's not here, I'll speak for him.

I think what really concerns us is a broader question about how morality is viewed. We don't think that morality should be used in certain ways. That's just not an appropriate use of morality and we all suffer when we treat morality that way.

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Silk and Silver]

Christiane: If you want to know more about *Moral Grandstanding*, or our guest's other work, check out our show notes page at examiningethics.org. The Prindle Institute for Ethics has another podcast called Getting Ethics to Work. Check it out on Apple podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts.

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