**Some Vices of Virtue Signaling**

**Abstract.** The accusation that one is virtue signaling is usually recognized as a legitimate criticism. Indeed, most individuals that face the accusation of virtue signaling attempt to escape the charge by claiming that they aren’t virtue signaling at all. Neil Levy claims, though, that the virtue signaler ought to embrace the charge of virtue signaling. Levy’s argument for this claim is, among other things, that virtue signaling provides higher-order evidence, it serves the aims of truth, and it occupies a central, morally justifiable role in public moral discourse by enabling cooperation in complex societies. On Levy’s view, any vices of virtue signaling are typically outweighed by its virtues. In this paper, however, I’ll push back against Levy’s argument in this connection. I’ll argue that the evidence provided by virtue signaling isn’t usually good evidence, since it’s not usually the kind of evidence that it’s rational to base one’s beliefs on, that virtue signaling isn’t a reliable guide to truth, and that, in typical circumstances, virtue signaling ought not play a central role in enabling cooperation in complex societies, since virtue signaling is typically morally objectionable.

1. **Introduction**

Virtue signaling is “making a contribution to moral discourse that” principally “aims to…get others to make certain desired judgments about oneself” (Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke 2016: 199).[[1]](#footnote-1) Typically, the charge of virtue signaling is taken very seriously, since it looks to make “one’s contribution to public discourse…a vanity project” (Tosi and Warmke 2016: 199). Plausibly, vanity projects are morally objectionable. One straightforward reason for thinking this is that, *on many occasions*, vanity projects indicate that one’s motives for engaging in such projects are disordered.[[2]](#footnote-2) Consider, for example, Shelly’s action of visiting her sick grandmother in the hospital. Suppose Shelly is doing this *because* she wants her friends who work at the hospital to think she’s a moral exemplar. Shelly’s not visiting her sick grandmother because she cares for her grandmother or because she thinks it’s right or just to visit her. Although she might, in fact, care for her grandmother and she might think it’s right to visit her, but that’s not *why* she’s visiting her sick grandmother, it’s *because* she wants to impress others. In such a situation, intuitively, Shelly is exhibiting a real character flaw, even though Shelly might be an overall good person and visiting her sick grandmother in the hospital is the morally decent and right thing for her to do. In a phrase: Shelly is virtue signaling. In virtue signaling, the virtue signaler might be doing something morally decent and right, as Shelly is, but, on many occasions, the motives from which the action springs mark the virtue signaler as morally blameworthy to some degree.[[3]](#footnote-3) Indeed, I think that’s precisely why the seemingly harmless charge of virtue signaling oftentimes really stings. If the charge is on the mark, then it suggests that the virtue signaler is exhibiting a genuine character flaw.

Yet one might think that even if virtue signaling is morally objectionable in the above way, that’s a rather tame criticism of virtue signalers. After all, one could be a virtue signaler and still be an overall good person (as Shelly could easily be) and, in any case, almost all (if not all) of us have measly type character flaws of the above sort, so it’s not clear why virtue signalers are to be singled out in this regard. Is virtue signaling, then, only criticizable on the grounds that it indicates that the virtue signaler has some genuine, but rather feeble, character flaw that might not scar her overall character?

Tosi and Warmke (2016: 208) think not. They’ve recently argued that virtue signaling has more substantive troubles. By their lights, virtue signaling acutely degrades the quality of public moral discourse (Tosi and Warmke 2016: 209-16). According to Tosi and Warmke (2016: 203-08), it does this by, *inter alia*, giving rise to five characteristic effects. Levy (2020: 3) offers a nice summary of these characteristic effects:

*Piling on* The serial reiteration of a condemnation already made by earlier commentators is apt to occur as each person grasps the opportunity to signal they (too) belong on the right side.

*Ramping up* Rather than being recognized as (merely) on the right side, some or all of the virtue signallers may attempt to outdo earlier signallers by condemning more harshly, aiming thereby to be recognized as more morally serious and perceptive than others.

*Trumping up* Another way to signal one is more morally serious and perceptive than others is to detect a moral problem that others cannot. This may lead to virtue signallers claiming to see a moral problem where there is none.

*Excessive outrage* Signallers may attempt to demonstrate their moral seriousness by displaying a degree of anger well out of proportion to any actual offense.

*Self-Evidence Claims* Moral perceptiveness may be signalled by an implicit analogizing to sensory perceptiveness. One can just see that, and how, wrong an action or assertion is, thereby implying that those who lack this capacity are morally deficient in comparison.

Tosi and Warmke’s view is that these five characteristic effects of virtue signaling make rationally deliberating about important social/political and moral issues much more difficult than they would otherwise be. Since, according to Tosi and Warmke (2016: 210), such effects (i) breed discussions about publicly available moral features of states of affairs that *aren’t* principally informed by reasons and evidence, (ii) they breed increased cynicism (all calls of injustice look insincere, and so the “social currency of moral talk” is devalued), (iii) they breed outrage exhaustion (moral talk becomes cheap thereby losing its distinctive rational force), and (iv) they breed group polarization (members of a group shift towards more extreme, false views). Consequently, virtue signaling interferes with the rational evaluation of states of affairs, and so it fails to support the core primary role that justifies the practice of public moral discourse—the deliberative function. According to Tosi and Warmke, then, in virtue signaling one is not simply exhibiting a rather minor character flaw, he’s interfering with the deliberative function of public moral discourse and, thereby, degrading the quality of public moral discourse. If Tosi and Warmke are on the right track, then the charge that one is virtue signaling has more than mere sting, it has bite.

Neil Levy (2020), however, resists Tosi and Warmke’s argument for the result that virtue signaling degrades the quality of public moral discourse. Levy’s argument in this connection proceeds along three main lines.

First, Levy argues that virtue signaling “provides higher-order evidence by conveying *confidence* and the *numbers* of people who share a judgment” (2020: 4, emphasis his)—e.g., the more people that claim that p ought to increase my confidence in p and the more confidently someone proclaims that p ought to increase my confidence in p. In which case, virtue signaling does offer evidence, *contra* Tosi and Warmke (2016: 209-10). It’s just higher-order evidence. In this way, then, virtue signaling supports the deliberative function of public moral discourse by supplying higher-order evidence.

Second, Levy argues that virtue signaling doesn’t interfere with the deliberative function of public moral discourse. Since it (a) can get us closer to the truth on important social/political/ moral issues by driving us towards the extremes of opinion (e.g., radical opinions about race and gender in the 1860s were closer to the truth than moderate opinions about race and gender) and (b), as mentioned moments ago, virtue signaling provides relevant higher-order evidence concerning those social/political/moral issues, and so virtue signaling can *rationally* move us towards the correct opinion. Virtue signaling, then, has benefits with respect to the deliberative function of public moral discourse. Levy (2020: 8) thinks that these benefits balanced up against virtue signaling’s costs make it reasonable to believe that (all things considered) virtue signaling doesn’t problematically interfere with the deliberative function of public moral discourse, but rather supports it.

Third, Levy (2020: 8-9) argues that virtue signaling occupies a central role in public moral discourse by enabling cooperation among like-minded parties, and so solving certain coordination problems. It does this, Levy (2020: 11) argues, by signaling that the virtue signaler is a trustworthy, reliable in-group cooperator. If public moral discourse has another primary function of enabling cooperation (i.e., the cooperative function of public moral discourse), then Levy (2020: 8) alleges that virtue signaling supports such a cooperative function, and so virtue signaling can be beneficial in ways other than by simply supporting the deliberative function of public moral discourse.

If Levy’s argument regarding the benefits of virtue signaling is on the mark, then it looks like he will have taken a very strong first step towards seriously weakening the bite of the accusation of virtue signaling. That is to say, if Levy has the measure of things, then one might think: So, what if S is virtue signaling? The virtues of virtue signaling typically outweigh its vices (Levy 2020: 1).

In this paper, however, I’ll argue that Levy’s argument isn’t successful in rescuing virtue signaling from being typically vicious. In what follows, I’ll argue that Levy’s argument doesn’t succeed in showing that virtue signaling *adequately* supports the deliberative function of public moral discourse. Nor does Levy’s argument meet the necessary challenge of showing that, in typical circumstances, it’s morally permissible for virtue signaling to play a central role in supporting the cooperative function of public moral discourse. I’ll conclude that with Levy’s argument failing along these different dimensions the charge of virtue signaling finds its way back onto the table as a legitimate criticism.

1. **Virtue Signaling and the Deliberative Function of Public Moral Discourse**

Let’s turn now to my first criticism of Levy’s argument. Levy (2020: 4-5) argues that virtue signaling provides higher-order evidence in both confidence and numbers, and so it has a kind of epistemic value. Virtue signaling is not a mere bonbon of the protesting classes. Suppose that Levy is right. It doesn’t follow, however, that virtue signaling isn’t defeated by other evidence of which we are aware or epistemically ought to be aware. And if it is defeated by other evidence of which we are aware or epistemically ought to be aware, then the kind of evidence that virtue signaling provides won’t be good evidence, since, when defeated in this way, it’s not the kind of evidence that it’s rational to base one’s beliefs on. But if one’s evidence isn’t good evidence, then it’s not going to adequately support the deliberative function of public moral discourse, since it’s not the kind of evidence that can *rationally* move one to form (or re-form) moral beliefs or commitments, which just is the main purpose of the deliberative function of public moral discourse (Tosi and Warmke 2016: 210).

This, of course, invites a central question: Is the evidence provided by virtue signaling defeated by other evidence of which we are aware or epistemically ought to be aware? I think so. By my lights, the evidence provided by virtue signaling is *routinely* defeated by other higher-order evidence of precisely this sort.

Before we can see this, though, a comment about defeat is in order. What is it for evidence to be defeated by other evidence of which we are aware or epistemically ought to be aware? Adapting a well-known definition of defeat from John Pollock (1987), I take, d, where d is either a mental state of S’s or d is a proposition that an epistemically decent inquirer would be aware of in circumstances identical to S’s circumstances, to defeat S’s evidence for believing that p iff (c) S’s evidence for believing that p provides an epistemic reason for S to believe that p and (e) d in conjunction with S’s evidence for p doesn’t provide S with epistemic reason for believing that p.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Now, with this definition of defeat in hand, we can begin to construct the argument that the evidence provided by virtue signaling is routinely defeated by other higher-order evidence of which we are aware or epistemically ought to be aware. To see this, let’s take it as given, following Levy (2020: 4), that virtue signaling about p provides evidence in favor of p, where p is some proposition of social or moral significance. Then consider that large numbers of people *regularly* confidently assert false things about things of social and moral significance, both in the present-day and historically.

For example, Orioles fans confidently assert that the Orioles will win tomorrow, large numbers of Republicans often confidently call their political rivals unpatriotic, large numbers of Republicans often confidently claim that the Democratic Party is chock full of communists, large numbers of Democrats often confidently shout that the Republican Party is chock full of deplorables, large numbers of 19th century Americans confidently declared that poor treat of Native Americans was morally permissible, large numbers of men in the 1910s in the US confidently maintained that women should stay in the home, large numbers of white people in the Jim Crow South confidently claimed that white people were morally superior to black people, large numbers of meat eaters confidently profess that eating factory-farmed meat is usually morally permissible, and so on.

What these many examples show us is that, on many social/political or moral issues, there’s often a side of some issue that includes large numbers of people confidently proclaiming the rightness of their position when, in fact, their position is hopelessly mistaken. Our awareness (or that we epistemically ought to be aware) of this fact in conjunction with the evidence provided by large numbers of people confidently asserting that p is such that it’s not epistemically reasonable to believe that the large numbers of people confidently asserting that p have it right about p. In which case, then, the evidence provided by virtue signaling is going to be routinely defeated (i.e., undercut) by our awareness (or that we epistemically ought to be aware) that large numbers of people confidently assert things of social or moral significance all the time that are false. Hence, virtue signaling isn’t going to provide the right kind of evidence to *adequately* support the deliberative function of public moral discourse, since the evidence provided by virtue signaling is not going to favor believing that what’s being virtue signaled about is true, and so, given this, one ought to withhold judgment concerning the proposition being virtue signaled about.

Let me put the present point another way. Imagine large numbers of people confidently insisting that God exists. Does the fact that large numbers of people are confidently insisting that God exists increase one’s credence in the proposition that God exists? Presumably, it doesn’t and, very plausibly, it ought not. But why ought it not increase one’s credence? Because we all recognize (or epistemically ought to recognize) that large numbers of people confidently insisting that things are a certain way isn’t truth-linked, that is, large numbers of people confidently assert things all the time that are false. So, in the situation involving the existence of God, assuming things are otherwise epistemically equal, the rational thing for us to do is to withhold judgment about God’s existence, since the fact that large numbers of people are confidently professing that God exists is defeated (i.e., undercut) by our awareness that on many occasions large numbers of people confidently profess things that are false. That’s why we ought not (and wouldn’t) increase our credence in the proposition that God exists on the basis of lots of people confidently proclaiming that God exists.

Similarly, then, assuming things are otherwise epistemically equal, the rational response to large numbers of people confidently proclaiming p, where p is some typical proposition of social or moral significance, is to withhold judgment about p, since one’s awareness that on many occasions large numbers of people confidently proclaim things that are false about p-like propositions undercuts one’s evidence for believing that p.

Thus, while Levy’s claim that virtue signaling provides higher-order evidence might well be true, the evidence provided by virtue signaling is precisely the kind of evidence that’s routinely defeated by other higher-order evidence of which one is aware or epistemically ought to be aware. And evidence that’s routinely defeated by other evidence of this sort isn’t going to be the kind of evidence that it’s usually rational to base one’s beliefs on, and so it’s not going to usually be good evidence. In which case, since virtue signaling is routinely defeated by other higher-order evidence of the relevant sort, it’s not going to usually provide good evidence, even if it provides evidence, and so, as a consequence, virtue signaling doesn’t *adequately* support the deliberative function of public moral discourse.

Where does this leave us then? Well, for Levy’s argument to be successful in the way that he hopes for he needs to show that virtue signaling *adequately* supports the deliberative function of public moral discourse. But in order to show that virtue signaling adequately supports the deliberative function of public moral discourse Levy would need to show that virtue signaling provides *good* evidence as opposed to *routinely defeated* evidence. After all, having defeated evidence for p can be epistemically worse than no evidence at all for p, since the defeated evidence can more easily lead one to a false belief concerning p than having no evidence at all for p. It seems to me, then, that Levy’s argument that virtue signaling provides higher-order evidence doesn’t gain much traction as a way of underwriting the practice of virtue signaling supporting the deliberative function of public moral discourse.

*2.1. Virtue Signaling is Epistemically Objectionable*

Let’s turn now to a related, but distinct concern. Tosi and Warmke (2016: 211-12) argue that virtue signaling often results in “group polarization, the phenomenon by which members of a deliberating group tend to move toward more extreme viewpoints.” Tosi and Warmke (2016: 212) allege that group polarization increases the likelihood that one advocates for a false view, and so, in this way, virtue signaling is epistemically objectionable.

While Levy (2020: 6) appears to agree that virtue signaling gives rise to group polarization, he doesn’t think that group polarization is clearly epistemically objectionable in the way that Tosi and Warmke suppose. Levy claims, for instance, that there’s “no a priori reason to think that the truth is more likely to lie in the middle of a group of deliberators…than at the extremes” (2020: 6). Levy (2020: 6-7) continues:

The only example Tosi and Warmke provide seems to make this point as well as any. Their example features a group of deliberators who, in the wake of a school shooting, are initially tentative in their support for stronger gun control but come to be more fervent through polarization. To me, that seems like group polarization serving the aims of truth. Obviously, in saying this I commit myself to a particular—controversial—normative claim. But there’s no reason to think this normative claim should be rejected because it was initially held only by a minority of the deliberators. Everything depends on the composition of the group and the distribution of opinion within it. Extreme opinions about race and gender were more accurate than more moderate opinions in the antebellum United States, for instance.

While I think that Levy is right to criticize the view that a more moderate opinion is more likely to be true than an extreme opinion, he misses that this isn’t enough to rescue virtue signaling from the charge that it’s epistemically objectionable, although it’s not epistemically objectionable in quite the way that Tosi and Warmke imagine. In a claim: Virtue signaling isn’t a reliable guide to truth. In support of this claim, consider two things.

First, virtue signaling isn’t more likely to lead one to true beliefs than false beliefs. After all, reliable folk and truth-tellers aren’t the *only* ones that virtue signal. Many peddlers of false propositions do as well: Racists, fascists, sexists, anti-semites, sports fanatics, communists, and so forth. These kinds of people are wrong about pretty much everything that they virtue signal about. Moreover, even if there are plenty of humans that are not peddlers of falsehoods, humans are fallible creatures, so it stands to reason that even honest, well-meaning humans are going to get a number of things wrong about complicated social and moral affairs, and these are precisely the kinds of things that many people *actually* virtue signal about. In light of all of this, then, it’s defeasibly reasonable to think that beliefs formed on the basis of someone (or some group) virtue signaling aren’t going to be true more often than not.

Second, consider that in an epistemic environment where there are a lot of fallible agents and a lot of peddlers of false propositions, as groups in such an epistemic environment become polarized because of virtue signaling, then, the obviously false extreme views very easily could be the place that most deliberators land. For example, astonishingly, a recent survey found that nearly 25% of Americans aged 18 to 39 are of the opinion that the Holocaust either didn’t happen or its numbers are exaggerated (Gilbert 2020). Another recent survey found that nearly half of the world’s population believes that climate change will *likely* lead to the extinction of humanity (Lomborg 2020: ch. 2). Assuming the results of these surveys are valid, if many young Americans are so terribly confused and misinformed about something so recent, momentous, and well-documented as the Holocaust and, roughly, half of the world’s population are so completely ignorant of the real expected costs of climate change, then, by my lights, that casts some heavy-duty doubt on the view that, as conditions of polarization begin to take root with respect to any issue, deliberators are more (rather than less) likely to end up on the side of truth. Indeed, one might think that it’s precisely that the Holocaust and climate change have become polarizing issues of late that’s driving more young Americans towards the extreme, false view that the Holocaust didn’t happen or is exaggerated and nearly half of the world’s population towards the extreme, false view that climate change represents a genuine extinction threat to humanity.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Think, moreover, of the Inquisition, the Salem witch trials, the French Revolution, the Soviet defense of Lysenkoism, the McCarthy era in the US, Mao’s Cultural Revolution, and others. These look to be examples of members of a group having an initially more moderate (even if reformist) view about some issue of social or moral importance and, then, the group moving hurriedly towards the very extremes of false opinion on this issue as a result of individuals making contributions to moral discourse that are principally aimed at impressing or pleasing in-group others in some way.

In a question: Why think that, under conditions of group polarization, deliberators are more likely to end up on the side of the angels than the devils? Based on two presently very polarizing issues and the historical record involving certain polarizing issues, it doesn’t seem particularly plausible to think that they would. In which case, it’s at least reasonable to think that virtue signaling could, especially when it brings about conditions of group polarization, just as easily land one in falsity as truth, and so not be a reliable guide to truth.

So, even though virtue signaling can, at times, serve the aims of truth, as it possibly does in the example that Levy mentions, it doesn’t seem like it can do so *reliably*, especially when it brings about conditions of group polarization. Virtue signaling, then, appears to be epistemically objectionable in a serious way: It appears to be an unreliable guide to truth. That virtue signaling is an unreliable guide to truth isn’t, of course, exactly the point that Tosi and Warmke are making above, but it supports, at any rate, their opinion that virtue signaling looks to be epistemically objectionable.

But wait! One might think that if we follow the promulgations of the *right* group of virtue signalers, then we’ll reliably end up on the side of truth. That seems clearly correct. But how do we determine which group is the right group? Presumably, we would need some other information, independent of the evidence provided by virtue signaling, that settles the issue for us. Then, though, it looks like that other information about which group to follow (that’s independent of the higher-order evidence provided by virtue signaling) is doing all the rational work in supporting our beliefs in this connection, and so virtue signaling isn’t bringing anything of epistemic value to the table, *contra* Levy’s contention that it is. That’s not a happy result for the defender of virtue signaling who thinks that virtue signaling has a clear epistemic role to play in supporting the deliberative function of public moral discourse. In which case, I don’t think it cuts much ice in this connection to suggest that so long as we are following the right group of virtue signalers we’ll reliably get at truth.

1. **Virtue Signaling and Enabling Cooperation**

Let’s turn to a different concern now. Levy (2020: sec. 4) argues that virtue signaling occupies a central role in public moral discourse by enabling cooperation, and so allowing us to stabilize cooperative norms. Levy’s (2020: 9-10) rationale here is that in virtue signaling one is both signaling her to commitment to certain norms and doing so in a way that is often costly, self-validating, and involves involuntary, strong emotions. In this way, then, Levy argues, virtue signaling is hard to fake, and so, in virtue signaling, one signals not only that she’s an in-group member, but that she’s a trustworthy, reliable (i.e., she isn’t a *fake*) in-group cooperator. Levy is, of course, absolutely right that enabling cooperation by signaling commitment to norms is plausibly an important function of public moral discourse that is rather *conveniently* overlooked by Tosi and Warmke.[[6]](#footnote-6) Levy (2020: 11) goes troublingly further though: He thinks that it’s plausible that virtue signaling *ought* to play the role of enabling cooperation in this way.

However, I think we need to take a step or two back. While it’s, of course, true that signaling commitment to norms in a hard-to-fake way is an important function of public moral discourse, since it enables cooperation, it’s very plausible to think that there are better, but equally effective, alternative ways of signaling commitment to norms that ought to play the role of stabilizing cooperative norms.

Indeed, I think it’s quite clear that Levy (2020: 11) is mistaken that virtue signaling “plausibly ought to play” a central role in public moral discourse. While virtue signaling appears to actually function as a way of signaling that one is a trustworthy, reliable in-group cooperator, and so thereby can play a role in solving certain coordination problems, there are obviously morally better ways of signaling that one is a trustworthy, reliable in-group cooperator. The simplest and most obvious way is by making contributions to public moral discourse that are sometimes costly and that are rooted in strong emotions and strong beliefs, but that are not self-centered, vanity projects. Such signaling would be hard to fake, since typically costly, self-validating, and involving involuntary emotions, and so would signal that one is a trustworthy, reliable cooperator inasmuch as virtue signaling does. Furthermore, this kind of non-selfish signaling can easily be done. In fact, it’s actually sometimes done—see, e.g., the talks in this very series. If, though, we can easily (and actually) do such hard-to-fake signaling without virtue signaling, then why ought we to virtue signal? It’s not clear that we should virtue signal. After all, prima facie, virtue signaling is morally objectionable, since its ends are self-directed in a way that’s morally blameworthy. Whereas signaling in a non-selfish way isn’t morally objectionable in this way. In that case, then, in typical circumstances, non-self-centered signaling is morally preferable to self-centered signaling. In which case, while virtue signaling might be one successful way to enable cooperation in a complex society, it’s not the way, in typical circumstances, that we *ought* to enable cooperation in a complex society.

What’s the upshot here then? Without question Levy is right that signaling commitment to norms in a hard-to-fake way is a central function of public moral discourse, insofar as it stabilizes cooperative norms. But we *can easily* signal our commitment to norms in a hard-to-fake way without virtue signaling. In which case, while one plausibly ought to signal her commitment to norms in a hard-to-fake way, she ought to do so in a way that’s not a vanity project. And that means that one ought to signal her commitment to norms without virtue signaling. Thus, the fact that we plausibly ought to signal commitment to norms in a hard-to-fake way hardly supports Levy’s view that virtue signaling plays a central role in public moral discourse that it plausibly *ought* to play. Indeed, I think something like the opposite is the case: In typical circumstances, we ought to signal, but we ought not virtue signal.

1. **Conclusion**

Let’s take stock. Levy claims that the virtues of virtue signaling typically outweigh its vices. His argument for this claim is that virtue signaling supports the deliberative function of public moral discourse and the cooperative function of public moral discourse. In support of the former, Levy argues that virtue signaling supplies higher-order evidence and its effects serve the aims of truth. In support of the latter, Levy argues that virtue signaling enables cooperation in a complex society by signaling that the virtue signaler is a trustworthy, reliable in-group cooperator. However, in this paper, I’ve argued that Levy’s argument isn’t successful on either front. Virtue signaling doesn’t *adequately* support the deliberative function of public moral discourse, since it’s epistemically objectionable, because unreliable, and it fails to provide *good* higher-order evidence, since its evidence is routinely defeated by other higher-order evidence. While virtue signaling clearly appears to support the cooperative function of public moral discourse, I’ve argued that (even if it does) virtue signaling ought not play a central role in supporting the cooperative function of public moral discourse, but rather that other, morally better forms of signaling ought to play this role. After all, virtue signaling is morally objectionable, whereas alternative forms of signaling aren’t morally objectionable in the way that virtue signaling is, and those alternative forms of signaling are just as effective at enabling cooperation as virtue signaling. By my lights, then, virtue signaling has vices that typically outweigh any of its virtues. Perhaps, then, virtue signaling is vicious after all.

**References**

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1. Tosi and Warmke (2016) prefer the term “moral grandstanding”, but I to prefer to use “virtue signaling”, since “virtue signaling” is the more commonly known term for the main phenomenon under discussion in this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It’s reasonable to think that there are possible situations where vanity projects (i.e., instances of virtue signaling) aren’t morally objectionable and might even be the most morally appropriate thing for one to do in a certain possible situation. In this paper, though, I’m only interested in the many actual occasions of virtue signaling that are morally objectionable. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For the remainder of the paper, I’ll mostly omit “on many occasions” as a qualifier on the claim that virtue signaling exhibits a genuine character flaw, but it should be supplied by the reader. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In this paper, I’m only interested in undercutting defeaters, that is, I’m only interested in the kind of defeaters that make it such that it’s no longer rational to believe the proposition at issue, although they needn’t make it rational to disbelieve it. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This, of course, doesn’t imply that climate change isn’t happening or that it won’t likely have an overall negative impact if not addressed. It’s just that it’s not at all likely that climate change will result in the extinction of humanity or the end of human civilization. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I say “conveniently”, since solving coordination problems of the above sort is a function of public moral discourse that virtue signaling looks really well-suited to support, and so it would be the most likely candidate role for it to play in public moral discourse. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)