Virtue signaling by consumers and companies
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The phrase 'virtue signaling' went viral during the 2016 election as a way to derogate political opponents whose moral posturing seems noisy but shallow. In this talk I'll argue that virtue signaling runs much deeper – it's a universal human motive with ancient evolutionary roots, important adaptive functions, and pervasive effects in modern business. We all show off our moral virtues, personality traits, political ideologies, and lifestyle choices through our public behavior and language – whether in bumper stickers, street protests, social media, dating apps, consumer choices, or job choices. I'll review the intellectual history, signaling theory, evolutionary psychology, and moral psychology behind virtue signaling, the underlying personality and cognitive traits being signaled, and the social and economic payoffs for signaling. Then I'll explore virtue signaling by consumers, companies, shareholders, employees, and journalists, in this social media world of moral panics, partisan polarization, Twitter outrage mobs, guilt by association, and woke capitalism. Businesses will need to understand virtue signaling better as its effects spread out from advertising, brand equity, and corporate public relations, to organizational behavior, human resources issues, regulatory policy, and geopolitics.