



When Success  
Becomes the New Normal:  
The Competitive Society  
and its Symptoms

Yvette Drissen



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# **When Success Becomes the New Normal: The Competitive Society and its Symptoms**

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# Table of Contents

<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>	<b>8</b>
1. Motivation, Societal Relevance and Research Question	8
2. Setting the Stage	13
3. When Success Becomes the New Normal: The Competitive Society and its Symptoms	18
4. Looking Ahead	20
<b>Chapter 2: Defining Competition</b>	<b>25</b>
1. Introduction	25
2. Competition in the Economics Literature	26
3. Competition in the Political Philosophical Literature	36
4. My Definition of Competition	43
5. Conclusion	59
<b>Chapter 3: Competitive Human Nature and the Development of <i>Amour-Propre</i></b>	<b>62</b>
1. Introduction	62
2. The Naturalistic View	64
3. The Socio-Historic View	68
4. A Rousseauian View: Inevitable but Malleable	71
5. Conclusion	93

<b>Chapter 4: Institutions, Practices and Corruption</b>	<b>95</b>
1. Introduction	95
2. Practices and Cooperation	97
3. Internal Goods versus External Goods	101
4. Virtues	107
5. Institutions	110
6. The Corruption Argument	114
7. Empirical Studies that Signal Corruption	124
8. Conclusion	135
<b>Chapter 5: Putting Yourself on the Line</b>	<b>138</b>
1. Introduction	138
2. Setting the Stage	140
3. Introducing the Harm Argument	144
4. Psychological and Emotional Costs	146
5. Opportunity Costs	152
6. Estrangement	156
7. <i>Pro Tanto</i> Reasons Not to Distribute Goods Competitively	163
8. The Stakes and Scope of Competition	168
9. Conclusion	174
<b>Chapter 6: Normatively Evaluating Competitions</b>	<b>177</b>
1. Introduction	177
2. On the Advantages of Competition	182
3. Internal Analysis: Explanation	189



4. Internal Analysis: Application (Part 1)	191
5. Internal Analysis: Application (Part 2)	196
6. The Framework and How it Should Be Used	205
7. Conclusion	218
<b>Chapter 7: Case Study: Dutch Academia</b>	<b>220</b>
1. Introduction	220
2. A Sketch of Dutch Academia's Competitiveness	223
3. Application of the Framework	246
4. Assessing Alternative Policy Proposals	258
5. Conclusion	269
<b>Chapter 8: Conclusion</b>	<b>271</b>
1. The Greenest Leaves are Always at the Top	271
2. Answering my Research Question	273
3. The Bigger Picture	278
<b>References</b>	<b>286</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>319</b>
<b>English Summary</b>	<b>323</b>
<b>Nederlandse samenvatting</b>	<b>327</b>

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1. Motivation, Societal Relevance and Research Question

Competition plays a big role in shaping our everyday life. Many institutions regulate and organise our social world, including the labour market, the workspace, education, the court room and leisure, and they do so in competitive manners. Let me provide two examples of my everyday life that sparked my fascination for the topic of competition. Note, however, that these are not just my experiences; they represent a broader societal phenomenon that I will come back to in a moment.

First, when I was a teenager, I had a side job as a tomato picker in a greenhouse just outside my village. Every Saturday and during my holidays I would go there and spend the morning picking tomatoes for a wage. During our mid-morning breaks, the manager distributed a paper with a ranking on it. The fastest pickers were at the top and the slowest at the bottom. I disliked this practice, even though I didn't have the words to understand my discontent back then. The ones at the top experienced a rivalry that seemed to motivate them. To me, however, it was very demotivating. While I had been working there for a while already, I was still slower than most despite doing my best, and therefore earned less money than the others. Moreover, the ranking made my relative shortcomings salient to me and others.

Second, in my early twenties, as I was about to finish my master's degree in philosophy and started to orient myself on the labour

market, I saw a couple of things happening around me. Students (including myself) not only wanted to do well academically, but they also took on all kinds of extracurricular activities such as board positions at student associations, voluntary work, language courses and honours programmes. While these activities can be fun, interesting and societally relevant, importantly, they were also needed to stand out on the labour market. When I applied for a traineeship at the European Commission, for instance, official eligibility criteria included having a bachelor's degree and speaking two EU languages. In practice however, applicants exceeded these criteria by far. From anecdotal experience I can say that applicants typically needed to have at least a master's degree and speak three to four languages to stand a chance. In the meantime, the news reported that more and more students and young professionals suffer from burnout and stress (in the Dutch context, see for instance: Nieuwsuur, 2015; van Egmond, 2022).

These experiences are not unique but can be put in a broader societal and institutional context, a context that seems to become increasingly competitive. Let me give two examples. The first example concerns the increasing number of resources Dutch parents spend on private tutoring to make sure their children score well at the Cito-toets. The Cito-toets is a test that children in the Netherlands do at the end of primary school, when they're about 12 years old. The organisation that develops these tests (Cito) compares the scores of each child in the Netherlands and puts them on a ranking. If a child has an A next to their score, that means that that child is the top 25%. B stands for an above average score (25%); C for a below average score (25%); D for a score

that is vastly below average (15%); and E for the children with the lowest scores (that is the bottom 10%) (Wouda, n.d.). The results are important for the children's future; a high score means that the child can move on to the 'higher' echelons of mid- and high school while children with lower scores 'only' go to the 'lower' levels. Not only does the sorting of children in 'higher' and 'lower' levels impact children's future (career) opportunities, children and parents also take great pride in knowing that they/their children are smarter than the others (Visser, 2021). Now, given that a good Cito-score can give children a competitive edge in the future, parents (at least those who can afford it) are incentivised to spend increasing amounts of money on private tutoring for their kids. This market grew by 70% between 2015 and 2019 (Dormaar, 2019).

A second example concerns the oft-heard complaint that market forces increasingly permeate various aspects of life, including health care (Kuijper, 2022; Radboudumc, 2021) and education (Behrens, Smits & Koeman, 2020; Jongewaard, 2017; Mellink, 2016). A common denominator in the marketisation of various societal domains is competition: institutions (such as health insurances, care providers and schools) are actively pitted against each other with the aim of fostering quality services as efficiently at as little costs as possible. Those who regard marketisation in a negative light, thereby also tend to be critical of competition. One of those critiques is that 'free competition' (e.g., in the educational and health sectors) leads to an increase in control and uniformity; while quality is reduced to numbers and outputs (Mellink, 2016; Verhaeghe, 2015, ch. 5).

Now, competition has many things going for it: it can motivate people to pursue their talents; it puts qualified candidates in the right social positions; it allocates productive assets to their most socially beneficial uses (Hussain, 2020, p. 80); and competition can also simply be fun. We have good reasons to implement competitive organisation and distribution mechanisms in several domains of our lives. Nowhere in my dissertation do I advocate for the abolishment of competition altogether. However, it is equally clear from my previous examples that there are limits to competition. Regarding the greenhouse example, by publicly comparing and ranking workers, the managers run the risk of shaming those at the bottom of the ranking. Regarding the graduate job market and the Cito-toets, people are incentivised to invest an increasing number of resources (e.g. private tutoring) just to keep up with the rest, that is, just to stay competitive or become competitive in the future. And regarding the marketisation of health care and education, organisations that serve the common good (curing patients and cultivating critical and well-informed citizens) are pitted against each other for scarce resources.

This dissertation questions the self-evidence with which competition is implemented in various aspects of our lives. It argues that we have good reasons to think that a society that becomes increasingly competitive is a worrying development. Philosophical analysis – one that is informed by empirical studies from economics, sociology and psychology – is pre-eminently suited to provide the conceptual and normative clarity to understand the topic of competition and the normative questions and concerns it raises in liberal

democracies. In this dissertation, I focus specifically on the *moral limits* of competition, that is, whether there can be something like *too much competition*. This is also the main research question that runs through my dissertation: **what, if anything, makes competition morally problematic and how do these moral problems inform our ethical evaluations of specific competitions in concrete domains and practices?**

Note that I do not aim to provide an *all-things-considered* evaluation of competitions, where arguments in favour and against are weighed off against each other and conclusions are drawn about whether and how to organise particular competitions for specific purposes. Instead, my research question is *conceptual* and *normative* in nature. Throughout the dissertation, I aim to develop arguments to show that competition's moral problems are not simply unfortunate side-effects, but form an inherent part of it. As I will argue, competition fundamentally shapes how we relate to each other, to ourselves and to the world around us. The moral problems I aim to identify and analyse should get a more prominent place in discussions about (the desirability of) competition, something this dissertation aims to contribute to. When we look at concrete cases, however, and consider whether and how some specific competition should be implemented, both objections and arguments in favour should be taken into account as well. While this lies beyond the scope of my research, I say more on the advantages of competition in chapter 6.

## 2. Setting the Stage

The topic of competition can of course be approached from many different angles. No study on competition will look the same. So, let me first set the stage and clarify how my research positions itself in the literature that is already out there. What can the reader expect and, perhaps more importantly, what should the reader *not* expect? I briefly discuss the literatures on fair equality of opportunity, neoliberalism, commodification and positional competition, clarify how my own research relates to these fields and explain the positive contribution of my dissertation.

First, discussions on the morality of competition often revolve around fairness. These discussions centre around the idea that competitions must be *fair* and set out to determine what the conditions are for fair competitions. In this literature, a distinction is made between fair contest and fair equality of opportunity. The principle of fair contest holds that, at a decisive moment in the competitive selection procedure for, say, jobs, people should only be judged on those characteristics that are deemed relevant for the position for which one is applying. The procedure is considered fair if it succeeds in selecting the person who, at that moment in time, is best suited for the position. The principle of fair equality of opportunity, in turn, is much more demanding than the principle of fair contest. Fair contest is concerned with whichever candidate presents itself to the contest at *one moment in time*, whereas fair equality of opportunity is about the trajectory *before* the contest, about whether candidates had a fair chance to appear on the start line in

the first place. It endorses the idea that one's life chances should not depend on circumstances of birth. So, whether one is accidentally born in a rich or a poor family should not determine one's life chances and requires some kind of intervention to make up for these accidental differences (Fishkin, 2014, pp. 25-37). The principle of fair equality of opportunity is famously articulated by John Rawls, who states that

positions are to be not only open in a formal sense [careers open to talents], but that all should have a fair chance to attain them. [...] More specifically, assuming that there is a distribution of natural assets, those who are at the same level of talent and ability, and have the same willingness to use them, should have the same prospects of success regardless of their initial place in the social system, that is, irrespective of the income class into which they are born. (Rawls, 1971, p. 73)<sup>1</sup>

While the literature on fair equality of opportunity seems like an obvious place to look when doing research on competition, I nevertheless decided not to engage with it too much. As this literature is already highly saturated, there is more to gain by focusing on whether there can still be something morally problematic about competition, *even if* we assume that the demands of fairness have been met. In the

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<sup>1</sup> Typical for Rawls' position is that this fair equality of opportunity (FEO) principle is complemented with the difference principle, which states that "[s]ocial and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are [...] to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged" (Rawls, 1971, p. 83).



remainder of this dissertation, therefore, I simply assume that the competitions I am discussing meet the conditions of fairness.

Moving on to the second branch of literature on my list: neoliberalism. My worry that society becomes increasingly competitive has been shared by critics of neoliberalism, so this might be another obvious literature to engage with. According to those classified as ‘neoliberals’, markets are fundamental to a free society that can only exist due to competition. Governments should never disrupt competitive processes; they should even subject its citizens to a strong and well thought through “competitive regime” (Mellink & Oudenampsen, 2022, p. 14). Critics of neoliberalism argue that this ‘competitive regime’ comes to permeate every aspect of society, including domains that arguably shouldn’t be governed by competition. Some insist, for instance, that “neoliberalism sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations” (Vallier, 2022); it shapes the way we relate to each other as human beings.

However, I decided to stay away from this literature, as ‘neoliberalism’ became an all-purpose term that has been used in many confusing ways. Some seem to regard it as a synonym for privatisation, deregulation (Scholte, 2005, p. 7) and a small government (Vallier, 2022), whereas others point out that neoliberalism is compatible with a strong government that actively regulates and fosters competitive markets (Mellink & Oudenampsen, 2022, pp. 20-21, 26; Bohlmeijer, 2022). Neoliberalism is said to promote individual freedom (Friedman, 1951/2013, p. 93) where people understand others and themselves as entrepreneurs of their own lives (Foucault, 2008, p. 226). At the same

time, neoliberalism seems to be compatible with authoritarianism (Brown, 2019, pp. 72-73). This literature is very politically and ideologically laden and it doesn't really pay attention to the moral dimensions of competition specifically, which is the focus of this dissertation. However, if my dissertation turns out to be useful to the literature on neoliberalism, I would welcome that.

My research does relate, however, to the literature on commodification, which is concerned with the moral limits of markets. In this literature, market advocates argue that free markets are the best way of distributing scarce goods and burdens. They argue that markets promote *freedom* – voluntary exchanges respect people's freedom – and *welfare* – exchanges are supposed to benefit both parties (Wempe & Frooman, 2018, p. 1). Critics call for the limitation of competitive markets in goods “whose meaning is closely tied to values such as intimate relations, individual flourishing, or child-parent relationships” (Herzog, 2021; see also Anderson, 1990; Sandel, 2012; and for a critical discussion, see Satz, 2010, pp. 81-84). Sandel and Satz, for instance, argue against markets in (that is, the commodification of) human kidneys (Sandel, 2012, pp. 110-113; Satz, 2010, ch. 9) and votes (Sandel, 2012, p.10; Satz, 2010, p. 9). And Anderson argues that “political goods” such as parks, streets and schools don't belong on a market (1990, pp. 193-194) (i.e. they shouldn't be commodified). These kinds of arguments typically assume that society consists of different social spheres that should each be governed by their own rules and principles and success in the market sphere shouldn't give one a competitive advantage in other social spheres, such as politics. Or as

Walzer puts it: “[t]he morality of the bazaar belongs to the bazaar” (1983, p. 109).

Like those who argue that there are moral limits to markets, I argue that there are moral limits to competition. Yet, while my research is inspired by the literature on commodification, it also departs from it in an important sense: I focus very specifically on *competition* as an organisation and distribution mechanism that can be and often is at work within or *outside of the market sphere*. Not only jobs, goods and services are distributed in competitive environments (like labour and other markets), but there can be competitions in sports, games, when dating, in the workplace, et cetera. Focusing on competition thus has a much broader scope than focusing on markets. It enables me to ask questions such as: are there moral limits to competition beyond the market, and if so, what are these limits and how can we identify them? Similar to Debra Satz’ parameters to identify noxious markets (2010), I too, aim to develop a framework by means of which we can identify the moral problems of competition. I thereby build on recent work by Waheed Hussain (2018a; 2020) who also focusses specifically on the morality of competition beyond markets.

Finally, my research also positions itself in the literature on positional competition. The phenomenon of the rat race, where everyone (metaphorically) has to run faster and faster, just to keep up with the rest is extensively discussed and analysed by authors like Fred Hirsch (1999), Robert Frank (2005; 2008; 2011), Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift (2006), Rutger Claassen (2008) and Tammy Harel Ben Shahr (2018). Recall my example of the traineeship at the European

Commission at the beginning of this introduction. The literature on positional goods helps us understand why applicants are caught up in an arms race for ever better resumes and thus need to live up to increasing expectations that exceed the minimum application requirements to even make a chance. The competitive advantage that certain goods (such as a master's degree) generate, decreases if there is a growth in supply (e.g., when the number of people with a master's degree increases). This explains why people have to invest more and more resources to obtain more of these what is called 'positional goods' (a second master's degree, an additional language course), just to keep up with the rest of their peers. For a critical stance towards this literature, see my paper *A Losing Game: Clarifying and Informing Debates on Positional Competition* (Drissen, 2023).<sup>2</sup>

### **3. When Success Becomes the New Normal: The Competitive Society and its Symptoms**

*When Success Becomes the New Normal: The Competitive Society and its Symptoms*. This was the working title when I started my PhD project. Now, five years and six substantial chapters later, this title still rings true. Let me explain.

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<sup>2</sup> In the end, this paper became a side project and is not included in my dissertation as such. The mechanisms explained in the literature on positional competition, however, inform my arguments throughout different chapters and inspired the title of my project.

*When Success Becomes the New Normal...* This sentence became more and more layered as my research progressed. At first it was a reference to the literature on positional competition, and specifically the mechanism of the rat race. When the standard of what is deemed ‘successful’ rises, that what was considered ‘outstanding’ before, now becomes the norm, the ‘new normal’. In a world where having a bachelor’s degree was sufficient to do a traineeship, having a master’s degree would make you stand out relative to the rest. However, since every (potential) applicant has an interest in standing out, an increasing number of them will also acquire a master’s degree, up to the point that a master doesn’t give one a competitive edge anymore. Something else needs to be done to be successful. A second master perhaps, until that becomes the norm. Hence, why ‘success becomes the new normal’.

However, throughout my PhD research, the meaning of this sentence has become richer. Now it also refers to how competition, and the *strive for success*, has become more *normalised* in different spheres of our lives. Think for instance of marketisation in the domains of health care and education, where institutions are pitted against each other with the promise of improved quality and increased efficiency. Or think of the greenhouse example, where it was simply assumed that the ranking would increase motivation and productivity. With more domains of life where one must perform better and *be* better than others – on the labour market, at school, at work, during our free time, when we’re dating – the need to strive for success becomes ‘the new normal’. Competition is everywhere, and if it is everywhere, we tend not to question it

anymore. It is the water in which we swim. We might even come to believe that we are competitive *by nature*. Hence, we could say that we live in an increasingly competitive society. The goal of my dissertation is precisely to question the self-evidence with which competition is introduced and taken for granted.

... *The Competitive Society and its Symptoms*. The second part of my title refers to the moral problems that arguably arise in a society that is competitive in so many ways. In medicine, a symptom is a physical or mental manifestation that indicates a condition or a disease. In my research, the term ‘symptom’ is metaphorically used to refer to signs that our society, or specific domains within that society, are ‘sick’, that is, there are certain phenomena (such as rat races and work pressure) that can be seen as manifestations of moral problems inherently associated with competition.

#### **4. Looking Ahead**

This dissertation consists of six substantive chapters. Each of them builds on the previous one and thereby gradually answers my main research question: what, if anything, makes competition morally problematic and how do these moral problems inform our ethical evaluations of specific competitions in concrete domains and practices?

In the conceptual chapter 2 I construct my definition of competition. First, I consult the economics literature as well as the political philosophical literature, after which I develop my own definition. Importantly, for the purposes of my research I reject

idealised textbook descriptions of perfect competition. Instead, I am particularly interested in competitive allocation mechanisms and selection procedures. I will argue that a plausible definition of competition must contain the following elements: there are multiple *participants* whose *performances* are being *compared* and *ranked*; *rules* and *procedures* stipulate the process through which participants can win; and the one who is ranked highest, according to the rules, obtains the prized status of ‘*winner*’ and potentially other *scarce goods* (such as prizes, money and prestige).

Before moving on to the normative part of my research, where I address my research question explicitly, I first need to provide a response to those critics who think that we are competitive by nature and that, therefore, competition falls outside of the realm of morality. In chapter 3 I inquire the question whether we are indeed competitive by nature and what the role of institutions is in inciting, limiting or shaping our competitive drives. This third chapter is thereby philosophical anthropological in character. After comparing what I call the ‘Naturalistic View’ and the ‘Socio-Historical View’, I eventually argue for a Rousseauian View of human nature. This view offers a gradual account of *amour-propre* and human competitiveness that is both inevitable and, importantly, malleable. Institutions play a crucial role in shaping our competitive drives in a healthy way and prevent them from becoming inflamed; yet how they should do that is a moral question.

When the conceptual and philosophical anthropological foundations are laid, I move to the normative part of my dissertation,

where I also take a closer look at the role of institutions in shaping our everyday lives. First, I provide answers to the first part of my main research question: what, if anything, makes competition morally problematic? In response, I develop the Corruption Argument (chapter 4) and the Harm Argument (chapter 5).

First, the Corruption Argument responds to the worry that something of value gets lost when we organise practices competitively. A thinker who can help us conceptualise this loss of value, including the mechanisms that are at play, is Alasdair MacIntyre. Chapter 4 takes his concepts of ‘practice’, ‘institution’, ‘virtue’, ‘internal’ and ‘external goods’ and combines them with Sandel’s insights on corrupting markets. I argue that institutionalised competition for external goods, too, tends to corrupt practices by crowding out its internal goods.

Second, the Harm Argument responds to the concern that the participants of competitions may suffer substantial costs in numerous ways. As I will argue in chapter 5, distributing goods everybody has reasons to want in a competitive manner generates very specific harms. Not only are some, the ‘losers’, excluded from scarce vital goods (in every distribution of scarce goods some people miss the boat); this exclusion is accompanied by three harms that are typical for competitions: (a) psychological and emotional costs; (b) opportunity costs; and (c) estrangement. This final harm – estrangement – is inspired by Waheed Hussain’s paper *Pitting People Against Each Other* (2020), where he argues that competition gives people strong reasons to disregard one another and undermines solidarity. While I think that Hussain makes a valuable contribution, I argue that competition’s



“moral defect” (Hussain, 2020, p. 87) is broader, which is why I incorporate his points about estrangement within my overall Harm Argument. As I will argue, harms (a), (b) and (c) are particular to competition and (together with corruption) give us strong *pro tanto* reasons not to distribute vital goods competitively.<sup>3</sup>

In chapter 6, I will tie my moral objections against competition together in a framework that informs our ethical evaluations of specific competitions in concrete domains and practices (part 2 of my research question). This framework is the outcome of what I call an ‘internal analysis’. This means that I investigate the moral problems that are *proper to* or *internal to* the fact that a *competition* is organised: it can crowd out internal goods (see chapter 4), poses social evaluative threats, incurs opportunity costs and pits people against each other (chapter 5). As I argue, the higher the stakes of the competition, and the wider the scope, the more competitive the practice or domain is, and the more such problems occur. This internal analysis culminates in a framework consisting of two aggravating properties – stakes and scope – and four bad-making properties – corruption, estrangement, psychological and emotional costs and opportunity costs – and can be used to assess the moral problems associated with competitive domains and practices.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This chapter started out as a paper that I co-authored with Bart Engelen. The paper has not been published yet, so in the meantime, I adapted it such that it would fit in the broader story line of this dissertation.

<sup>4</sup> It’s worth mentioning already at this stage that my framework should not be understood as an *overall* assessment of a concrete domain or practice, where I analyse and weigh off all possible advantages and problems. Instead, I focus particularly on

Chapter 7 will showcase the value of my framework by applying it to a concrete case: Dutch academia, and particularly the phase early on in one's career. I focus on a domain where concerns about the "destructive effects of faith in endless competition" (WOinActie, 2019) have already been expressed. This allows me to demonstrate what my framework *adds* to the existing critical voices out there. I conclude the chapter with an evaluation of some policy proposals and initiatives aimed at reducing competition.

In sum, competition plays a big role in our everyday lives. Many institutions regulate and organise societal domains, such as the labour market, the workspace, education and leisure (at least in part) in a competitive way. While competition has many things going for it, it is equally clear that (too much of) it can be morally problematic. This dissertation helps to make sense of the worry that a society that celebrates success, winning and being 'the best' comes with substantial costs and losses. It affects how we perceive others (as competitors) and ourselves (in comparison to others). And, in the strive for success, we risk losing sight of those things that really matter (such as wisdom and solidarity).

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*moral objections* against competition, so in that sense, my framework provides only a partial answer to the questions whether and when competition is morally desirable. The value of my framework mostly lies in its ability to identify the moral worries competitions raise, even when we have good reasons to organise them that outweigh these concerns. In certain cases, competition should be avoided altogether, but in other cases, it suffices to keep the competition in place but make it 'healthier' by implementing certain adjustments. More on this in chapter 6.

# Chapter 2: Defining Competition

## 1. Introduction

This chapter formulates a definition of the main term of my research project: competition. In the introductory chapter I already expressed my worry about the introduction and intensification of competition in different societal domains. To determine whether, and to which extent, societal domains are indeed competitive, we need a definition that can help us with exactly that. In this chapter, I therefore identify what characterises competitive arrangements (compared to non-competitive arrangements). Then, with my definition of competition on hand, I will be able to argue that competitive arrangements can be ‘healthy’ or go awry (chapter 3), depending on how its distinctive features play out in practice. As I will argue, competitions are morally problematic because, or rather, *when* practices get corrupted (chapter 4) and participants are harmed in the process (chapter 5). My conceptual and normative analysis will result in a framework by means of which we can assess the competitiveness of domains and practices (chapter 6). I will test and apply this framework in the domain of Dutch academia (chapter 7).

This chapter proceeds as follows. I will first touch upon some common understandings of competition in the economics literature in section 2 and explain why I distance myself from these mostly idealised notions. In section 3 I take a critical look at contemporary definitions in

the politico-philosophical literature, after which I formulate my own definition in section 4. Section 5 concludes.

## 2. Competition in the Economics Literature

The first place to look for academic definitions of competition is, of course, the economics literature. It was John Stuart Mill who wrote in 1848: “only through the principle of competition has political economy any pretention to the character of a science. So far as rents, profits, wages, prices, are determined by competition, laws may be assigned to them” (Mill, 1848/2001, book 1, chapter 4, p. 274).

One such ‘law’ that is hugely influential in economics is the idea that, if individuals follow their own self-interest, what is called ‘invisible hand’ of the market ensures that society as a whole benefits. So, there is no need for a central planner. In fact, no centralised governmental body *can* or *should* decide what’s best for us. It is only in a disaggregated manner – on a competitive market – that we can do best for ourselves and society at large. This idea – that following one’s self-interest benefits society at large – is inspired by Adam Smith’s magnum opus, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (in short, *The Wealth of Nations*), published in 1776. Particularly the following quote, where Smith talks about the division of labour, has been taken to apply to society at large:

Give me that which I want, and you shall have this which you want; [...] and it is in this manner that we obtain from one

another the far greater part of those good offices which we stand in need of. It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages. (Smith, 1776/2011, book 1, chapter 2, pp. 6-7)

So, the baker wants an income and customers want bread; they exchange bread for money by appealing to each other's self-interest and thereby both get what they want. Since there are continuous mutually beneficial exchanges happening between each of us, everyone wins. Later in *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith explicitly mentions the invisible hand to illustrate that import from foreign countries should be restricted if these goods can also be produced by domestic industry:

By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. (Smith, 1776/2011, book 4, chapter 2, p. 184)

Here, Smith mentions that, in the context of foreign trade, the pursuit of one's self-interest frequently promotes the public good even if individuals have no intention of doing so. It is as if an invisible hand coordinates individual interactions in way that benefits society.

Note however, that while Smith thought that competitive markets were a good thing, he was by no means pro *laissez-faire* capitalism. He was in favour of regulating credit markets (Satz, 2012, p. 47) and thought that the state had an important role to play in several aspects of society: the protection of national borders, the enforcement of civil law and the provision of public goods and services that cannot be governed by profit, such as education (Smith, 1776/2011, book 5, chapter 1, pp. 289-306). Reducing Adam Smith to his notion of invisible hand (and turning this notion into a 'law') greatly misrepresents his ideas, as he also paid a lot of attention to how society's flourishing depends on non-self-regarding virtues, such as justice and benevolence (Graafland & Wells, 2021).

Yet, Smith's notion of the invisible hand had a big impact on the academic discipline of economics and neoclassical welfare economics in particular. The first fundamental theorem of welfare economics states, for instance, that perfect competition, in combination with the assumption that market agents are rational and self-interested,<sup>5</sup> maximise social efficiency (Stantcheva, 2019, slides 28-29). Perfect

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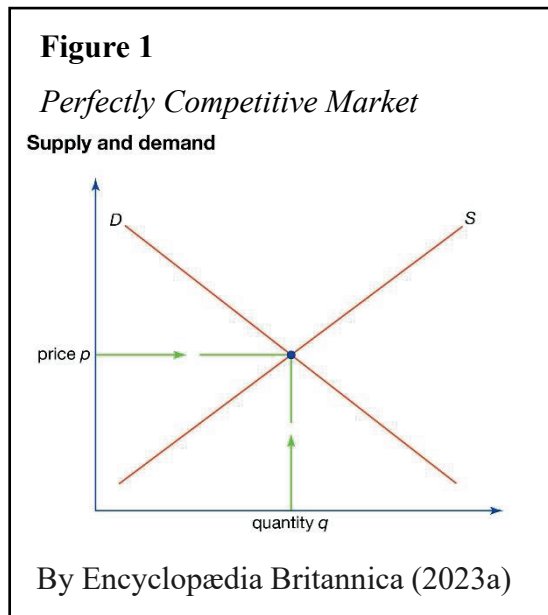
<sup>5</sup> For an explanation on how rationality and self-interest are related, see Apestequia (2018, pp. 5-8).

competition refers to a theoretical market structure in which the following conditions are met:

(1) freedom of entry, (2) large numbers of suppliers and demanders, [...] (3) homogeneous products, [...] (4) complete mobility of factors of production and products, and (5) complete knowledge possessed by all participants of prices and conditions affecting demand and supply in all parts of the market. (Townsend, 2002, p. 56)

An essential characteristic of perfectly competitive markets is that sellers and buyers are price-takers. When there is a big number of sellers and buyers, all relatively small to the size of the market, and there is a homogeneous product, no individual agent can have an identifiable impact on the price (Townsend, 2002, p. 59). An example of a market that comes close to meeting the above conditions is the wheat market in pre-industrial times. There was a large number of producers who all sold an identical product: wheat. Individual sellers were not in the position to increase the price of their product, because then buyers can easily shift to another wheat seller. The sellers are price takers (Herrera González, 2011, p. 43). Prices are not determined by sellers but instead by supply and demand, where the price is set at the intersection of the supply curve (S) and the demand curve (D) (Townsend, 2002, p. 59; see Figure 1 below).

The demand curve (D) in Figure 1 represents the quantities of a given good or service that buyers are able and willing to purchase at each price. The supply curve (S) represents the quantities of a that good or service that sellers offer for sale at each price. If buyers want to purchase more of a product than is available on the market, the price will rise. If more of a product is available than buyers want to purchase, prices will go down. A price will be found when demand meets supply (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2022a). This intersection is regarded as



the point where the market is at an equilibrium and is thereby the most efficient allocation of the good in question. Perfectly competitive markets achieve maximum efficiency when supply and demand are perfectly adjusted to one another (Pleatsikas, 2018). No one can be made better off without making anyone else worse off i.e. a Pareto-efficient allocation has been achieved (Townsend, 2002, p. 7). Here, the idea of the invisible hand comes back: only under the assumption that individual agents are *self-interested* and rational when making market choices, and thereby know what they want and need, know what the



available market options are, and act upon that, a *socially* efficient allocation of products can be achieved.

To better understand what perfect competition is, it is helpful to contrast this picture with markets that are non-competitive. In a non-competitive market, individual agents are not mere price takers, but have the power to influence the price. These agents typically have market power because they are the only or one of the few players in a market (Georgantzís & Attanasi, 2016). Take a diamond company who controls 80% of the diamonds in the world or a pharmaceutical company whose medicine is awarded with a patent from the government. In both cases, there are barriers to entry: most of the finite natural resource of diamond is already in the hands of one company, so it is difficult for a new company to enter the market, unless they find another diamond mine somewhere or start making synthetic diamonds. Likewise, due to the patent, other pharmaceutical companies are not allowed to produce and sell the same medicine for a certain period. In both cases, the diamond and pharmaceutical company have control over the price they ask because they are the only or one of the few players in the market (Fisher & Waschik, 2002, chapter 3). They are not price takers, but can raise the price as they see fit.

What then does it mean for markets to become *more* or *increasingly* competitive in this neoclassical sense? Typically, this refers to (1) the removal of barriers to enter the market; (2) an increase in the number of rivals; and (3) less collusion and more independent behaviour between competitors. These three may be causally related: a lower barrier to entry may lead to a greater number of competitors,

which may lead to the breakdown of collusion (Vickers, 1993, p. 3). Removing patents on a medicine, for example, would lower the barrier to entry for pharmaceutical companies to produce this medicine as well, which leads to more competitors in this market, who all independently try to produce the medicine as efficiently as possible. Or, the removal of barriers for women or working class people to enter university – and thereby making university education more accessible – leads to a more competitive graduate job market, since there is an increase in graduates who are all individually looking for jobs.

The notion of ‘perfect competition’ has received criticism in the economics literature. One of them is that the conditions mentioned above are merely a theoretical possibility and don’t accurately model *actual* markets (Herrera González, 2011, p. 41). The condition of full information, for example, does not reflect our messy world full of uncertainties, so a model that assumes full information denies a crucial part of human reality (Stamate & Muşetescu, 2011, pp. 120-121).

In contrast to the *static* notion of perfect competition, there is another meaning of ‘competition’ in the economics literature which refers to it as a *process* (Townsend, 2002, pp. 54-55). The Austrian School of Economics, for instance, endorses this view of competition as a process of discovery and entrepreneurial opportunities. No one has full knowledge, but learns by experience, by trial and error (Kirzner, 2005). One such member of the Austrian School is Friedrich Hayek. According to him, perfect competition is not even competition at all (1958, p. 92).

In his chapter ‘The Meaning of Competition’, Hayek tries “to show that what the theory of perfect competition discusses has little claim to be called “competition” at all and that its conclusions are of little use as guides to policy” (Hayek, 1948/1958, p. 92). Not only do markets never meet the beforementioned conditions in practice – e.g., that of homogeneity of products and full information – it would even be undesirable for a market to meet them, since this would make them static. In Hayek’s view, competition should instead be understood as a dynamic process, as the continuous rivalry between businesses. This understanding would also be much closer to the way the term ‘competition’ is used in “ordinary language” (Hayek, 1948/1958, p. 92), where competitors constantly try to outdo each other. “Advertising,<sup>6</sup> undercutting, and improving (“differentiating”) the goods or services produced are all excluded [from the] definition [of perfect competition] – “perfect” competition means indeed the absence of all competitive activities” (Hayek, 1948/1958, p. 96).

Following Hayek’s “real life” (Hayek, 1948/1958, p. 92) understanding, we should see competition as a succession of events where producers offer a product at the lowest costs, preferably lower than their competitors. While trying to gain a bigger market share, a producer will often be overtaken by yet another competitor, who, in turn, will be prevented from having too big of a market share as well, et cetera. Competitors don’t typically offer homogeneous products

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<sup>6</sup> In a perfect competition, advertisement would be absent, because customers are rational and have full knowledge and therefore know exactly what they want.

(condition 3 of perfect competition) but instead try to differentiate and stand out to attract potential customers. This competition is far from ‘perfect’, but it is ‘imperfect’ competition that is essential in making sure that goods are supplied at any time, as cheaply and efficiently as possible (Hayek, 1948/1958, p. 102). The real worry, for Hayek, is therefore not whether markets meet the idealised and static conditions of perfect competition, but whether there is enough of a dynamic rivalrous process going on between different companies (Hayek, 1948/1958, p. 105).

In line with the understanding of competition as a process, Vickers distinguishes a fourth meaning of *increasingly* competitive markets: (4) a market becomes more competitive when “the reward for obtaining the thing for which all are striving, or the penalty for failing to obtain it, is increased or introduced in the first place” (Vickers, 1993, p. 3). In the context of markets, rewards and penalties typically revolve around winning or losing market share, profits and reputation. To put it differently, this fourth sense of ‘increased competition’ refers to *stakes*: the higher the stakes – that is, the higher the rewards for the winners and the more severe the penalties for the losers – the more competitive a practice is. It is exactly this notion of ‘more competitive’ that becomes crucial in the normative part of my research project, from chapter 5 onwards.

Now that I have characterised two influential notions of competition in the economics literature – competition as a state (perfect competition) and competition as a process – let me conclude this section by explaining how I depart from these notions. Starting with perfect

competition, there are two main reasons for why this meaning of competition does not fit within my broader project. First, economists speak of perfect competition in a theoretical context, where competition is only ‘perfect’ when certain idealised conditions are met. Second, this type of competition only concerns markets in a very narrow sense. The aim of my research project, however, is to move beyond an idealised market context and focus on real life competitions in both market and non-market settings. The notion of ‘perfect competition’ therefore seems unhelpful in my endeavour to understand and analyse competition in various societal domains, including sports, the workplace, education, academia, health care and the court room.

Understanding competition as a process, however, where enterprises aim to outdo each other for increased market share, comes much closer to how I want to conceptualise competition. The definition that I develop in section 4 will therefore explicitly be formulated as a process (or a procedure) where participants are incentivised to outperform each other. However, where economists particularly focus on markets, I also want to focus on competitions that affect our daily lives *beyond the market sphere*. Definitions that also aim to conceptualise competition beyond the market sphere can be found in the political philosophical literature. Let me first present and build on contemporary contributions from political philosophers before I provide my own definition in section 4.

### 3. Competition in the Political Philosophical Literature

Political philosophers have attempted to conceptualise competition and assess its moral desirability beyond the domain of the market, with contemporary contributions from James Keating (1973), Alfie Kohn (1992), Jonathan Wolff (1998), Christoph Lütge (2019), Waheed Hussain (2020; 2018) and Shai Agmon (2022).<sup>7</sup> Let me briefly discuss their definitions of competition and point out which elements of these definitions I take with me and which elements I reject for the purposes of my project.

First, according to Keating, “competition is an attempt [by the individual] (according to agreed-upon rules) to get or to keep any valuable thing either to the exclusion of others or in greater measure than others” (Keating, 1973, p. 6). He regards competition in and of itself as neither a vice nor a virtue but can only be critically assessed in concrete situations (Keating, 1973, p. 10). Competition is an undeniable fact of life; we cannot escape it, even for a single day (1973, p. 11). The real question for him is whether we can keep competition within proper limits: “Men should be esteemed not because they abstain from

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<sup>7</sup> Another name in the contemporary literature on competition is Arthur Isak Applbaum with his book *Ethics for Adversaries* (1999). However, I will not consider his book when discussing different definitions below, the reason being that he focusses mostly on how individuals should behave within adversarial institutions (e.g. whether lawyers are allowed to lie, given their institutional role), without really addressing the moral desirability of these institutions themselves. Yet, it is the moral desirability of competitive institutions that is the focus of my research.

competition, but because they hold in check that fierce desire for supremacy which threatens the observance of the agreed-upon rules which alone distinguish competition from [...] warfare [...] and destructive conflict” (Keating, 1973, p. 11).

I agree with Keating on two points: first, the importance of (agreed-upon) *rules* in defining competition; and second, his emphasis on *concrete* situations in assessing whether competition is indeed desirable. The rule-aspect will also be incorporated in my own definition in the following section. The second point will only become relevant once I develop my normative framework in chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 where I also argue that it depends on the concrete situation whether competition is morally problematic and if so, to which extent.

However, Keating’s characterisation of competition is confusing as well. While he intends to formulate a definition of competition that is neither virtuous nor vicious, he does admit that competition should be kept within proper bounds. Does that mean that competitions become problematic after a certain degree? Moreover, he mentions that one’s (natural) desire for supremacy threatens the adherence to rules, turning competition into a destructive conflict. So, the problem for him does not seem to be the competition itself (even though it should be kept within limits...), but whether one can control one’s fierce desires such that they don’t destroy the (civilised) rule-governed competition. In the remainder of my dissertation, I will argue quite the opposite: competition itself is problematic and can even fuel one’s (destructive) desires, depending on how it’s organised.

Another thinker who argues that competition itself is the problem is Alfie Kohn. In his book *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* he distinguishes *structural* competition from *intentional* competition. The former is a situation, the latter is an attitude. Structural competition is characterised by mutually exclusive goal attainment. Your success requires my failure, and vice versa; our fates are negatively related. In a structurally competitive arrangement, “two or more individuals are trying to achieve a goal that cannot be achieved by all of them. This is the essence of competition” (Kohn, 1992, p. 4). Competition therefore *creates* scarcity: “If I must try to defeat you to get what I want, then what I want is scarce by definition,” Kohn says (1992, p. 4). The prized status of ‘winner’ is also such a scarce good created purely by organising a competition, which entails comparing individuals to determine who is ‘the best’ and therefore gets this prized status (Kohn, 1992, p. 4).

Intentional competition, in turn, refers to one’s competitiveness, one’s attitudes and desires to win and to be number one (Kohn, 1992, pp. 4-5). One can have a competitive attitude, without being in a competitive situation, for instance, when one tries to be the funniest person at the party, even though nothing is organised to determine who stands out compared to whom and who gets the prized status. Likewise, one can be in a situation that requires one to outdo others, without feeling competitive about it. Perhaps you just try to do your best and see what happens (Kohn, 1992, pp. 4-5). For my research, I will mostly focus on structural competition, as I am interested in the competitive organisation of institutions. This will also be reflected in my definition



of competition, which will incorporate the *rules* aspect, the *comparing* aspect and the *mutually exclusive goal attainment* aspect. However, I don't leave attitudes out of the picture entirely, since structural competition can have a relevant and worrisome impact on one's attitudes. I will get back to this in chapter 3 (on how competition shapes *amour-propre*) and chapter 5 (on how competition can provoke enmity between people).

Moreover, I fully agree with Kohn that (structural) competition creates scarcity. This type of scarcity is not necessarily about the objective shortage of some good, although, this *can* of course be distributed competitively. For instance, two people who are ill can be pitted against each other for a single portion of medicine. Crucially, however, being at the top (of the ranking) is a status *created* by the competition that can only be obtained by one competitor, per definition. I will adopt this point about scarcity in my definition of competition as well.

Jonathan Wolff, in turn, defines competition as follows in *The Ethics of Competition*:

What all cases of competition appear to have in common is that they involve a number of people (or groups, or teams) who engage in an activity in which there can be different levels of achievement, normally measured on a scale (which will often be broadly correlated with some underlying trait, which the scale is designed to capture). The person, group or team performing at the highest level of achievement, as measured by the scale, is

the winner, and is given some recognition, reward or prize.  
(Wolff, 1998, p. 89)

After giving this definition, Wolff provides several cases of competition, including a lottery (Wolff, 1998, pp. 89-90; Wolff, 2002, p. 604). This is a strange move, since his definition explicitly includes *achievements* and *performances*, something that seems absent from lotteries, which are purely the result of luck. For this research project, I do not commit to a view of competition that includes lotteries and in section 4 I will even explicitly differentiate between the two. Elements of his definition that are more intuitive and that I will adopt in my definition as well are: (i) the focus on different levels of achievement, (ii) measured on a scale, (iii) where the one who performs at the highest level of achievement, as measured by the scale, (iv) is the winner and gets some reward.

Another definition of competition comes from Christoph Lütge's book *The Ethics of Competition: How a Competitive Society is Good for All*. He sees competition as a win-win-win-win-win-lose game (Lütge, 2019, p. 66). Surely, there are unquestionable losers in the positive-sum game that competition is. People who lose their job are initially disadvantaged, but this is largely compensated for by a sufficiently competitive society, according to Lütge (2019, p. 66). Just like Keating, he explicitly distinguishes competition from a battle: where the former is constructive and governed by rules, the latter is destructive and out of control:

In contrast to a struggle or contest, [...] [competition] is not primordial and cannot permanently sustain itself. Competition in all its forms rather involves a situation that is only storable because of rules. Competition is a highly artificial construct, which, when left alone, can very easily devolve into a “ruinous competition” or a Hobbesian “war of all against all. [...] The function of battle is destruction; of competition, construction. (Lütge, 2019, p. 6)

While I am on board with Lütge’s point that competition is a highly artificial construct that should be governed by rules, I am reluctant to see competition as a win-win-win-win-win-lose game, even the ruled-governed ones, as will become apparent in the remainder of my dissertation. Another thinker who is also concerned about competition’s moral limits is Waheed Hussain.

In his paper *Pitting People Against Each Other*, Hussain focusses on ‘competitive institutions’ as one kind of a ‘Rivalry Defining Arrangement’. “Consider the typical tennis match,” he says to illustrate his point. The rules that govern this venture determine that those who have the institutional status of ‘winner’ can make claims on recognitional goods (such as applause and trophies). The rules define the procedure through which one can secure this status of ‘winner’, for instance, by getting the right number of points, games and sets. It is typical for competitions that “one person’s completing the procedure to secure the valuable status for herself [...] interfere[s] with another

person's completing a corresponding procedure to secure the valuable status for herself" (Hussain, 2020, pp. 83-84).<sup>8</sup>

Finally, in a very recent contribution, Shai Agmon distinguishes between two concepts of competition: *parallel competition* and *friction competition*. Parallel competition "is designed to create separate pathways for each competitor wherein they can maximize their performance" and friction competition "is designed to facilitate a clash between competitors" (Agmon, 2022, p. 5). A paradigmatic example of friction competition is the adversarial legal system. In this system, each party self-interestedly fights for its own case by providing the best legal arguments. The competition is designed such that the parties must interfere with one another in an exchange of arguments, where the one tries to refute the other's claims and vice versa. This clash between competitors is supposed to generate social benefits. In a court case for instance, truth is supposed to prevail (Agmon, 2022, p. 13).<sup>9</sup> Agmon argues that friction competitions are less "stable" and therefore in need of "carefully constructed and monitored conditions" (2022, p. 27).

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<sup>8</sup> This understanding of competition has moral implications: given that competition entails that one participant's success in securing the valuable status necessarily interferes with other participant's attempts to secure this status, participants have strong reasons to disregard one another. In short, competition estranges people from each other (Hussain, 2020). More on Hussain's Estrangement Account this in chapter 5.

<sup>9</sup> It could be in one party's self-interest, however, that the truth does not prevail, so there is an important tension between following one's self-interest in a court case and truth-finding.

Agmon takes perfect competition as a paradigmatic example of parallel competition, where there is no prolonged contact between the different competitors nor any personal rivalry. The different players are all supposed to maximise their own self-interest by adjusting themselves to the price system. Competition law is even designed “to keep each competitor in her own lane, so that she does not interfere with the activity of the other competitors” (Agmon, 2022, p. 12). For parallel competition, social benefit is the sum of the aggregated independent efforts of each competitor.<sup>10</sup>

#### **4. My Definition of Competition**

Based on an assessment of previous definitions, there are several elements that align with my research project of determining whether and to which extent societal domains and arrangements, institutions and procedures that distribute goods are competitive. From the economics literature I concluded that conceptualising competition as a *process*, where competitors try to outdo each other, comes closest to our everyday understanding of competition. We also saw that a domain (e.g.

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<sup>10</sup> Though, at the end of his paper, Agmon admits that perfectly competitive markets don't exist in real life and that actual markets have frictional elements after all, as companies dual with each other for a bigger market share (Agmon, 2022, p. 35-36). To add to this, even if we perceive of markets as a process of friction competition (rightly so, I believe), the role of anti-trust law is still important. Not to keep each competitor “in her own lain” but to make sure the damage inflicted on competitors does not get out of hand.

a market) becomes more competitive by increasing the *stakes*. From the political philosophical literature there are several elements that correspond to my research project. The *rules* aspect allows us to identify how domains and institutions are structured and how goods are distributed. The rules aspect also distinguishes competition from battle or war. Moreover, we saw that *scarcity* is a crucial aspect of competition, where participants *performances* or achievements need to be *compared* to determine who can make a claim on these scarce goods (such as the status of ‘winner’, rewards and prizes). We also saw that the *fates of the competitors are negatively linked*; your success implies my failure (to obtain the good in question), and vice versa. All these aspects taken together allow me to formulate the following definition of competition:

*An arrangement – typically an allocation mechanism or selection procedure – is competitive when its rules stipulate a procedure through which participants can secure the prized status of ‘winner’ and possibly other desirable scarce goods (such as recognition, prizes, jobs and grants). The procedure is designed to compare the participants’ performances and rank them accordingly. Participants who are ranked highest, as stipulated by the rules, can claim the status of ‘winners’ and receive (a greater measure of) scarce goods at the cost of participants who are ranked lower – the ‘losers’ – who get none of the desirable scarce goods (or in smaller measure).*

For my research project I am particularly interested in competitive allocation mechanisms and selection procedures, because they form such a big part of life in Western liberal democracies. We allocate jobs and provide access to prestigious universities on a competitive basis by selecting the most suitable candidate (as stipulated by the rules). Governments and funding bodies allocate funding competitively among NGO's, universities and hospitals. And we all compete for the status, prestige and/or power that comes with winning competitions. Competitive allocation mechanisms and selection procedures are so widespread in society, that they deserve special conceptual and moral scrutiny.

Let me continue my conceptual analysis, by elaborating on the different elements of my definition: (4.1.) participants, (4.2.) comparing performances, (4.3.) rules and procedures and (4.4.) the prized status of 'winner' and other scarce goods.

#### *4.1. Participants*

Starting with *participants*, which can refer to individual people, but also to teams and other groups and entities competing against each other (think of companies, universities or countries). I speak of 'participants' in plural because my definition always assumes two competitors or more. This makes sense, given the dissertation's focus on competition as an organisation and distribution mechanism within social institutions in specific domains, which typically involves many people (or at least, more than one). I thereby exclude the possibility that one can compete

against oneself (one's past self, perhaps), which I see as self-improvement instead.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4.2. *Comparing performances*

Crucial for my definition of competition is that the participants' performances need to be *compared* to know how 'well' everybody did relative to one another. By means of some procedure, as stipulated by the rules, participants are compared according to their level of performance where those with the highest levels of performances end up at the top, while those with lower levels of performance fall behind. The resulting ranking could literally be a list that includes all the participants from those at the top all the way till the bottom, or involve a simple distinction between a winner with the rest of the participants ending up as 'losers' or 'non-winners'. For example, the applicant who meets most of the criteria gets the job, while the rest is rejected.

Comparing performances requires that participants' qualities or outputs are in some way *visible and comparable*. When possible, relevant qualities are typically measured and expressed in numbers (e.g. time, distance, units, money, height, et cetera). Take a 100-meter sprint championship. Speed is the measure of the runners' performances.

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<sup>11</sup> I can imagine that the rhetoric of 'competing against yourself' fits a neoliberal discourse that aims to motivate people to get the best out of themselves, even in the absence of others. While this would be an interesting idea to explore, this idea falls outside of the scope of my research project.



Measuring can be an efficient and effective way of making a ranking, because numbers can easily be compared. Those who ran the fastest time, covered the largest distance and got highest grades, end up on top of the ranking, and, therefore, win.

When qualities are harder or impossible to measure, such as a person's opinions, attitudes, skills and knowledge, the ranking is typically done on the basis of indicators of (previous) achievements. For instance, in determining which candidate is best suited for a job, hiring committees decide based on a set of qualities needed for the job: the right combination of skills, knowledge, attitudes, the impressions given during the job interview, and so forth. A curriculum vitae, certificates and diplomas are examples of showing what you have achieved in the past. The one whose qualities end up on top of the ranking 'wins' and gets the reward (the job).

Your visible performances in a competition are supposed to be a (partial) reflection of some trait or ability. Your running speed says something about your capacities as a runner and your resume is a proxy for your capacities as an employee. This data is used by those charged with comparing and ranking participants between each other.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Obviously, a heavy focus on measuring, numbers and showing (off) runs the risk of creating a system with a huge discrepancy between a 'paper reality' (what one *shows* to others) and an 'actual reality' (what traits and qualities people actually have). Especially when the rewards are substantial – think of medals, prizes and salaries with which one can consume conspicuously – one might be inclined to mimic success by tweaking the numbers and obtaining the tokens of what it means to be 'successful',

However, I say ‘partial’, because I understand one’s performance as the outcome of a combination of ability, effort and luck in a given task. Similar to what Frank Knight says about games, a competition “must test the capacity of the players, and to do this it must compel them to exert effort” (Knight, 1923, p. 608). He adds: “if there is no element of luck in it there is no game. There is no game in lifting weights, after one once knows how much can be lifted, even tho the result measures capacity” (Knight, 1923, p. 608). While I follow Knight’s conceptual point that the outcome of a competitive game is always the result of a combination of effort, ability and luck, I have reservations about his weightlifting example. Weightlifting does fit my definition of competition if it is organised as such and does include a certain level of unpredictability. Let me present my view on the role of luck in competition.

First, apart from ability and effort, luck is always involved in bringing about one’s performances in a competition. One could be lucky to have certain talents or one could be lucky to have a supportive family who encourages you to develop certain abilities (this type of luck has been called ‘constitutive luck’ in the literature, where genes, educators, peers and other environmental factors contribute to making us who we are (Nelkin, 2023)). And, perhaps, on the day of the competition, one can be lucky to have had a good night of sleep while one’s opponent slept badly because of a noisy neighbour (this type of luck has been

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without actually having the proper qualities. More on this in chapter 4, when I develop my Corruption Argument.

called ‘circumstantial luck’ (Nelkin, 2023)). On this view, luck even plays a role in weightlifting, given that talent, access to resources and other unpredictable things play a role here.

Second, in some competitions – competitive *games* most notably – one actively cherishes this luck element. In the case of a football match, for instance, one could even say that the result *should* be unpredictable. That’s what makes the game fun to play and to watch and makes it worth playing at all (if we already know which team will win, there is no point organising a tournament). In the case of a job competition, however, one could argue that we should try to reduce the luck element and select people on their merits as much as possible. The difference here is that job competitions are not games. Games are typically played for their own sake, because they’re fun in and of themselves. Job competitions, on the other hand, are organised to select the most suitable candidate and are even regarded as unfair when accidental factors play (too much of) a role in them. It is exactly competition as a selection and allocation mechanism, that is the main focus of my research project.<sup>13</sup>

In non-competitive arrangements, the performance and comparing aspect is absent. When we look at a lottery, for instance, no

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<sup>13</sup> It becomes problematic however, when one denies or forgets about the luck element in bringing about one’s performances altogether. In our efforts to reduce accidental factors in job competitions, for instance, we might start to falsely believe that people got there because of effort and ability only. This problem is extensively described in the literature on the myth of the meritocracy. See for instance Young (1961), Littler (2018) and Sandel (2022), amongst others.

efforts or skills are assessed or compared. Winning is purely a matter of chance. In need-based arrangements, one's needs may be compared, but not one's performances. It is about who *needs* the medicine the most, not about who won. And in seniority-based arrangements, what is being compared is not one's performances but the number of years one has served in an organisation.

Finally, the literature on positional competition<sup>14</sup> sheds a light on an underlying mechanism that can be at play when we compare performances in a competitive manner: to keep up or stay ahead of one's competitors, one needs to invest an increasing amount of time, money and effort. How does this mechanism work? Many goods have positional value, which means that their absolute value depends on its relative position in a hierarchy (Brighouse & Swift, 2006, p. 474). For example, whether having one master's degree gives you an (absolute) advantage or disadvantage on the labour market depends on how many master's degrees other job applicants have. And whether running 5 kilometres in 30 minutes is fast or slow depends on how fast your competitors are.<sup>15</sup> So, how well you do in a competition depends on

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<sup>14</sup> See my paper *A Losing Game: Clarifying and Informing Debates on Positional Competition* (Drissen, 2023) for a review of the literature on positional competition.

<sup>15</sup> Of course, these achievements can also be good in and of themselves, regardless of how they compare to others. Running fast can make you feel strong and doing sports in general is healthy. Education can spark your curiosity for the world and turn you into a critical thinker. Yet it is how you compare to others that is a key element of competition.

how well others are doing relative to you. Fred Hirsch describes positional competition as:

competition that is fundamentally for a higher place within some explicit or implicit hierarchy and that thereby yields gains for some only by dint of losses for others. Positional competition, in the language of game theory, is a zero-sum game: what winners win, losers lose. (Hirsch, 1999, p. 52)

This means that, if you increase your chances of winning the competition by obtaining a higher place in the performance hierarchy (e.g. by training extra hard to become a faster runner), other runners are necessarily pushed down compared to you. Imagine that you are fourth on the ranking, but by increasing your speed by 10 seconds per kilometre, you pass your competitor that is currently on number three. When you move to the third position because of your improved performance, your competitor on number three will necessarily move to the fourth position, which is a zero-sum game.

Note that it is in everyone's individual interest to stand out, or at least not to fall behind, in the competition for the prized status of 'winner' and other scarce goods that go along with it (prizes, jobs, prestige, etc.). However, because everyone as an individual tries their best to improve their performances compared to others, that what is required to keep up or stand out becomes more demanding as well. Or, in Hirsch words, "[a]dvance in society [i.e. being more successful than others] is possible only by moving to a higher place among one's

fellows, that is, by improving one's performance in relation to other people's performances. If everyone stands on tiptoe, no one sees better" (Hirsch, 1999, p. 5). If your peers are following their second master's degree, you cannot lag, since you will probably also be interested in the same kinds of jobs after your studies. You invest more and more time, money and other resources to keep up with the rat race, but your position compared to other's remains the same. That is, you spend time and money doing another master's degree that is surely also interesting in and of itself, but it doesn't give you a leg up in the competition for the job; you only don't fall behind your peers. Unless you do something extra, thereby raising the bar of what's 'normal' to get a job again.<sup>16</sup> Hence the first part of the title of my dissertation: *When success becomes the new normal...*

Note, however, that comparing performances in and of itself does not constitute competition. There is a difference between merely determining who is better than others at something versus putting rules and procedures in place that determine what the rewards are and how participants ought to behave and perform in order to get these rewards.

#### *4.3. Rules and procedures*

The rules are a crucial part of my definition of competition: they stipulate the background conditions that should be met; they define the procedure through which participants can secure the prized status of

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<sup>16</sup> This phenomenon of the rat race is extensively described by Robert Frank (2011).

‘winner’; they specify the criteria based on which the winner is determined; and they spell out the scarce goods at stake. They also define what is considered cheating and what the sanctions are when someone cheats. It is also the rules aspect that separates competition from that what it is not: battle, war, combat, where ‘everything is allowed’ to destroy the other. In a competition, other people are opponents or rivals. In a battle, other people are enemies.

Consider a football match. The rules stipulate that two teams of eleven players must participate, that the game lasts for a specified amount of time, that the field needs to have a certain size and that a particular ball needs to be used. (In informal settings, when you just want to play with some friends on a random field, you can agree upon changing the rules. You might decide, in consultation with the others, that 5 players per team is enough and change the size of the field for instance.) Crucial for the game of football, however, is the procedure through which a team can win, namely, by scoring more goals than the opposing team. That is, a ‘ranking’ is created where the first place is for the team who scored most goals and the second, and last place, is for the team who scored fewer goals. Moreover, the rules can even stipulate that the team who scores most points does not only get the prized status of ‘winner’, but also, say, a trophy. Finally, the rules determine which behaviours are permitted and which ones are forbidden, and what the consequences are when one violates the rules. A goal doesn’t count, for instance, when it’s offside. And players are not allowed to stop the ball with their hands, except for the goalkeeper, otherwise they get a red card.

A distinction that is important to consider is the one between constitutive and regulative rules. For some activities or practices the competitive rules are part of what *constitutes* that same activity; “they make something the case by representing it as being the case” (Searle, 2010, p. 97). The rules of chess, for example, represent the very activity and it stops being chess if one takes away the competitive rules. If you remove the rule that players should checkmate their opponent, then there is no point in calling it ‘chess’ anymore. The players just move the pieces on the board without any goal or purpose.

In contrast, the rules of other activities or practices are *regulative* in nature. They have the function “to bring about a certain form of behaviour, and is satisfied if the behaviour matches the content of the rule”, e.g. “drive on the right hand side of the road” (Searle, 2010, p. 97). Linking this to competition, the rules can regulate an activity in a competitive way, but the activity as such can exist without the competitive rules. Take portrait painting. One can organise a painting competition in which one determines who is best at painting/who made the best painting, in terms of technique, use of colour and creativity. The competitive rules regulate the activity in the sense that it incentivises participants to work on some skills (those needed to increase one’s chances of winning) and not on others (those not conducive to winning). However, the practice of painting does not need to be organised competitively, that is, the practice of portrait painting does not cease to exist when you take away the competitive rules.

The notions of constitutive and regulative rules allow for a gradual account of competitiveness. We already saw that domains can



become more competitive when we increase the stakes. However, we can also say that a domain becomes more competitive when more aspects of that domain/more practices within that domain are organised competitively.

This can mean, first, that more competitions are introduced where the competitive rules are *constitutive* of the activity. Imagine, for instance, the domain of education, and physical education in particular, where the teacher decides to replace all cooperative and solo sports (like yoga or some types of dancing) with competitive sports (like football, tennis and hockey). So, when you participate in physical education classes, you cannot do otherwise than to engage in competitive sports; the domain of (physical) education has become increasingly competitive.

‘More competitive’ can also mean, second, that *regulative* competitive rules are introduced in practices and domains that were not organised as such before. Imagine history classes, again in the domain of education. Competition is not inherently part of the discipline of history education; you can very well teach history without comparing students and selecting and awarding winners. However, the teacher decides to pit students against each other by quizzing them on their knowledge and rewarding the student with most correct answers with a prize. In this case, we can say that the domain of (history) education has become increasingly competitive.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Both ways of ‘increasing competition’ – increasing the number of competitions governed by constitutive rules and introducing competitive regulative rules in

Another topic I need to briefly touch upon in the context of competitive rules and procedures, is the topic of fairness. The rules of a competition typically determine which qualities are of value (Claassen, 2008, p. 1041). In a sprinting competition, the rules determine that the participants' speed counts, and not beauty. The competition is considered fair if the participants are only tested on the qualities that are valuable in that given competition (speed) and not on irrelevant factors (such as eye colour). In many sports, one tries to make the competition fair by implementing rules that put competitors of roughly the same level in the same category or league. A clear example is boxing, where people of around the same weight compete against each other. Importantly, however, the rules of a competition are not necessarily fair. Even in our efforts to make boxing fair by introducing weight categories, we can still say that it is unfair that someone at the lower end of a weight category has to compete against someone at the higher end of this category. The chances that the lighter boxer will win are substantially smaller, which raises the question whether even boxing matches with the added rules and procedures around weight categories are fair.

So, rules and procedures are essential to my definition of competition because they govern and shape institutions and practices, which is the focus of my research. In determining whether an institution

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practices that were not competitive before – will be part of what I call 'the scope'. The wider the scope, the more competitive society/a societal domain is. The notion of 'scope' will be developed in chapters 5 and 6.

or practice is competitive, and to which degree, one needs to observe the rules, procedures and policies that are in place. However, rules can shape and structure institutions and practices in many different, also non-competitive, ways. In lotteries, need-based arrangement and seniority-based arrangements, for instance, goods are allocated and selections are made by means of different rules. The one who happens to have bought the right lot, wins the jackpot. The families who fall below a certain minimum income threshold are the one's who receive social assistance first. The one's who've worked for the company the longest, get a senior position. Crucially, in all three non-competitive arrangements, rules and procedures don't evaluate, compare and reward one's performances.

Note that I exclude from my definition of competition whatever subjective attitudes competitors might have. For example, one might participate in The British Bake Off solely for the love of baking, without having any interest in winning. However, we can still speak of a competition here, because it is organised and the rules are stipulated such that the participants' cakes are compared and ranked, with the baker who performs worst having to leave the show and only one baker winning in the end (the prize). Even though participants may enjoy and benefit from the game, there are clear winners and losers in this competition. However, I don't disregard subjective attitudes entirely. On the contrary, they are relevant, but, as I will argue in the following chapter, (competitive) institutions and their rules actively *shape* these subjective attitudes. It's the rules that are part of my definition of competition as an *arrangement* or *procedure*, not the attitudes.

#### 4.4. *The prized status of ‘winner’ and other scarce goods*

The final elements of my definition that require an explanation are the prized status of ‘winner’ and scarce goods. With regards to scarcity, I stay close to Alfie Kohn (1992) and Waheed Hussain (2020). Recall that in any competition, the one who is ranked highest, based on one’s performances, secures the status of ‘winner’. This status is already a scarce good in and of itself, since not all participants can call themselves ‘winner’.<sup>18</sup> Importantly, scarcity is therefore created by the competition. While many people can be *good* at, say, painting, there is only one who can win a painting competition, namely the one who is ranked highest.

Besides this abstract status of ‘winner’, there are additional scarce goods that one can obtain by winning a competition. Some goods are closely linked to the status of ‘winner’: honorific goods that signal that one wins the competition (such as medals and trophies). These goods give prestige and recognition. Other goods are not inherently linked to this but can be valuable for other reasons: a job provides the winner with income for example.

Competition does not only create scarcity; it is also used as a mechanism to allocate goods of which there is an “objective shortage” (to use Kohn’s words; 1992, p. 4), such as jobs, seats in the parliament

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<sup>18</sup> ‘Competitions’ where they call everybody a ‘winner’ are not real competitions, in my view. Or think of giving everyone a participation prize. While this is a noble initiative, meant to make all the participants feel valued regardless of their performances, we can only speak of a *competition* when the rules are such that one winner emerges (or at most, a few winners emerge).

or funding. Take a research grant, which is scarce in the sense that the grant consists of a limited amount of money. A euro spent by one person cannot be spent by another. The funding body designated to allocate this grant opts for a competitive procedure aimed to select the candidate whose performances were ranked highest, according to stipulated procedures and criteria. However, the funding body could have used another allocation mechanism instead, such as a lottery, seniority-based rules or need-based rules. Competition is therefore by no means an inevitable way of distributing scarce goods; there are several options.

Until now I've mostly talked about those winning the competition and the scarce goods and benefits they obtain as a result. But what about the losers? Usually, the participants of the competition didn't have the scarce goods to begin with anyway. So, what exactly do the 'losers' lose, one might ask? In my dissertation, I use the term 'losers' as a shorthand for 'non winners', which means that they are excluded from the status of winner and the benefits that come with it. In chapter 5, I will discuss to what extent losers can be said to lose something and to what extent this arguably means they are harmed in the process.

## **5. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I learned from and built on various definitions of competition in the economics and political philosophical literature and eventually constructed a definition that, I think, succeeds in depicting what is characteristic of competitive arrangements (as an allocation and

selection mechanism), compared to non-competitive arrangements. This definition also aligns with my research project in the sense that I need a definition that fits with my aim of identifying whether, and to which extent, societal domains are (too) competitive. Now I have the conceptual tools to do exactly that: we can call an arrangement ‘competitive’ when the rules and procedures are designed in such a way that scarce goods can only be obtained in a mutually exclusive manner, by outperforming and, as a result, being ranked higher than other participants. I have explained that I am particularly interested in competitive selection procedures and competitive distribution mechanisms, such as competitive funding allocation procedures and job competitions.

I have also suggested two ways in which a domain can become *more competitive*: (a) by increasing the *stakes*, that is, by increasing the rewards for the winner and/or the penalties for the ‘losers’, and (b) by widening the *scope* of competition, that is, by organising more elements of a certain domain in a competitive manner.<sup>19</sup> This gradual notion of competition, including the normative question of when it goes too far,

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<sup>19</sup> As we have seen in section 2, another, understanding of ‘more competitive’ concerns the removal of barriers to entry and an increase in competitors. However, this understanding does not play a major role in my dissertation. In the context of my research, I focus on the question when we can speak of ‘too much competition’, morally speaking, but it seems to me that the removal of barriers to entry and thereby making the competition more accessible (to women or working-class people, for instance) is a good thing and would therefore not be a matter of ‘too much competition’.

will be further developed in the rest of my dissertation. Chapter 4 will be dedicated to my Corruption Argument and chapter 5 will be dedicated to the Harm Argument. As I will argue, it is the task of institutions to keep competition's risks within healthy limits.

A philosopher who was also aware of the shaping role of social institutions is Jean-Jacques Rousseau. His *Second Discourse: Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Mankind* (1755/2002) provides us with an unsettling picture of how competition can get out of hand. In the following chapter I will investigate what we can learn from Rousseau with regards to competition, how it relates to human nature and what implications it has for debates about the institutional framework that governs our societies. I develop an optimistic reading of his work that allows us to keep competition within proper limits in the right social and institutional settings.

# Chapter 3: Competitive Human Nature and the Development of *Amour-Propre*

## 1. Introduction

This chapter aims to show that human competitiveness is not merely an amoral, ‘natural’ fact of life that should be kept outside of the sphere of morality. Instead, it aims to demonstrate that the ethical analysis of competition – i.e., what is morally problematic about it and when it’s too much – is possible, meaningful and even necessary in today’s liberal democracies, where so many goods are distributed competitively. This chapter is important in light of my dissertation because it shows the necessity of the normative chapters yet to come (chapters 4-7). In what follows, I argue that competitiveness is essentially based in a human drive for recognition and esteem and that institutions play a crucial role in shaping this inevitable yet malleable human drive. A thinker who also puts great emphasis on the shaping role of social institutions is 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Building on his work and that by Rousseau scholars, I will argue that depending on whether and how competitions are organised, our drives for esteem and recognition can develop in a healthy manner or go awry.

However, before I present the view that our human drives are both, inevitable *and* malleable, I will first situate this view in between two positions or ‘camps’ who either argue that our human drives are



entirely inevitable or entirely malleable. I call the first position ‘the Naturalistic View’ (section 2) and the second ‘the Socio-Historical View’ (section 3).

According to the Naturalistic View, competition is part of our evolutionary and biological make-up, which is why competition within our society is inevitable. Crucially, this view holds that our competitive human nature is a driving force in society. This drive is *one-directional* and goes from our nature to the way society functions.

According to the Socio-Historical View, human competitiveness is first and foremost socially constructed. Some even argue that our ‘competitiveness’ is purely the result of institutional and societal factors. Crucially, this view understands our human nature and society as *mutually constitutive*.

After teasing out the characteristics of both opposites independently, I will be able to show the need for a third account of human nature and competitiveness. This third view is, as I mentioned, largely inspired by Rousseau’s notion of *amour-propre* and comes down to this: our drive to seek recognition from and compare ourselves to others is a permanent, inevitable and distinctly *human* drive but is also always shaped by our relationships with others and by the broader social and institutional context we live in. More on this in section 4. The upshot of this chapter is that we should think critically about how to design institutions such that they foster our *amour-propre* in a healthy way (section 5).

## 2. The Naturalistic View

Again, the Naturalistic View holds that competition is part of our evolutionary and biological make-up, which is why our society is inevitably competitive as well. Or, adherents of the Naturalistic View justify any competition between humans in a society by appealing to their inevitable human nature. The impact is one-directional, from our biological and evolutionary make-up to societal functioning.

A theory that infamously adopted one version of the Naturalistic View is social Darwinism, which came up in the late nineteenth century and declined in the twentieth century. Social Darwinists (wrongly) assumed that the laws of nature, notably Charles Darwin's laws of natural selection, directly translate into how societies at large function. They argued that human life in society was essentially a struggle ruled by 'the survival of the fittest', an expression coined by Herbert Spencer. Social Darwinists were pro *laissez-faire* capitalism and against (government) attempts to reform society, because this would interrupt 'natural' competitive processes where the 'fittest' would survive and be successful (i.e. wealthy), while the 'unfit' wouldn't make it (and live in poverty) (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023b).

While social Darwinism disappeared, in part due to evidence that undermined its basic assumptions (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023b), there are contemporary attempts to justify a competitive society based on 'natural' or biological traits that humans allegedly share. Take clinical psychologist and self-help guru Jordan B. Peterson. With more

than 6 million subscriptions to his YouTube channel,<sup>20</sup> he reaches a wide audience with videos such as ‘Men who know this are ahead of the competition’. He explains human competitiveness and dominance hierarchies by means of his lobster theory. Lobsters who win a fight have higher levels of serotonin and show their dominance by getting bigger. According to Peterson, so do people. Conversely, depressed men are like defeated lobsters. Give a lobster serotonin and it will stretch out and fight again. Similarly, give people anti-depressants and they can take on the world again (Essential Truth, 2017). Apparently, chemical processes and behaviours in lobsters can be directly translated to humans.

Like social Darwinists, Peterson explains that social hierarchies are based on (natural) competence and competitiveness: “If you want to be a successful man you should be competent, and then you will move up the hierarchy. That will make you attractive, and for good reason” (The Invisible Man, 2018). In another video he adds that people with an IQ lower than 85 – which is about 10% of the population, according to him – are not capable of reading and following instructions. “Given that lack, how are you gonna compete? The answer is: you’re not, because a low IQ is a good predictor of poverty” (JRE Clips, 2018).

Such arguments tend to cancel out moral discussions about the desirability of social hierarchies and institutions, and how they come about, by claiming that something naturally just *is* the case: chemical processes in our bodies determine how dominant and competitive we

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<sup>20</sup> YouTube channel consulted on the 29<sup>th</sup> of January 2023.

are; (natural) competence and intelligence determine our success in the social hierarchy. According to this vision, moral questions about the desirability of competition itself are deemed meaningless, which is a vision that I object to in this chapter.

A more moderate, nuanced and plausible version of the Naturalistic View comes from Bertrand Russell's *Authority and the Individual* (1979). In line with the Naturalistic View, he argues that our competitive drives are biologically, genetically and evolutionary engrained. Crucially however, and contrary to social Darwinists and Peterson, Russell doesn't merely accept whatever impact our competitive drives have on the way humans live together in society. Instead, our competitive drives should be channelled and limited in the right ways by institutions.

Russell argues that human nature has biological, genetic and evolutionary grounds and that our competitive drives date back to our early ancestors. They could not yet behave in very conscious and well-considered ways and mostly followed their instincts, meaning that they were friendly towards members of their own tribe and hostile towards other tribes. Today, we still possess these instincts, but we also became (partially) aware of rational grounds of certain behaviours. However, when rational considerations suppress our instincts too much, the latter will inevitably resurface again, for example, as an urge to destroy other things and beings (Russell, 1979, pp. 12-14).

So, given that rivalry has always been the driving force behind most of our serious occupations, we can nor should try to eliminate it altogether. Normal human beings cannot be happy without it, Russell

says (1979, p. 21). No one would want to abolish competitive games for instance. Imagine that two competing football teams would, out of brotherhood, help each other by first kicking the ball in one goal and then in the other goal. That would make nobody happy. Similarly, rivalry between clubs, places or organisations has always been a useful and productive mechanism (Russell, 1979, p. 75).

In contemporary societies, Russell proceeds, we need to find effective ways of venting these partially unconscious primitive drives. This can be done by finding outlets in which we can safely express our competitiveness, within the constraints of the rule of law. These can be found in modern sports, literature, the art of painting and politics for instance (Russell, 1979, pp. 19-21).

We need to make sure, however, that competition does not become destructive. Losing a competition should not be as disastrous as losing a war. Nor should economic competitions become so chaotic that it leads to famine among those who went bankrupt. Football, for example, would not be an attractive sport if one risks being killed or ending up dying of hunger. Losing should only lead to the loss of glory (Russell, 1979, p. 75). The idea then is to find ways to combine adventure, danger and rivalry with civilised life (Russell, 1979, p. 24).

So, Russell's more moderate version of the Naturalistic View doesn't cancel out moral discussions about the desirability of institutions. Instead, such discussions play a role in channelling and limiting our competitive drives. However, and this is what makes it a version of the Naturalistic View nonetheless, the impact is still *one-directional*: our natural drives impact our social life in various ways and

the only moral questions that are relevant here are about whether, where and when we should (try and) contain them.

### **3. The Socio-Historical View**

Those who want to debunk (parts of) the Naturalistic View argue that that what is regarded as ‘natural’ (e.g. competitiveness) is actually socially and historically determined and constructed within a specific context. They argue, for instance, that “evolutionary explanations tend to be based on notions of individual competition under conditions of scarcity, which are historically and culturally specific and need not hold” (Fehr, 2018) in other times and contexts. In contrast to the Naturalistic View, the Socio-Historical View understands human nature (and human competitiveness) first and foremost as historically and socially constructed. It might even go so far as to say that a non-competitive human nature is possible under specific socio-institutional conditions. Crucially in this view, human nature and human society *mutually constitute one another*.

One version of the Socio-Historical View can be found in traditional Marxism. In *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (1983), Alison Jaggar provides a particularly clear explanation of the distinct social and historical impact on human’s nature in traditional Marxism. I will stay close to her interpretation in the current section.

According to the Marxist version of the Socio-Historical View, human biology and human society are related in a ‘dialectical’, non-dualistic way, which means, following Jaggar, that biology has

permitted the development of social organisations; and social organisations, in turn, have permitted and encouraged a certain direction in biological evolution (Jaggar, 1983, p. 55). To get a better understanding of this mutually constitutive relationship, we need to start with Marx's use of the term 'praxis'. Praxis is the human ability to transform the world in a conscious and purposeful manner to satisfy our needs. Non-human animals, in contrast, only use what the world provides to fulfil their needs. For example, humans do not simply graze or find a shelter that is ready to use, but grow food and build their own shelter. Even though some animals also build webs, nests, and so forth, they do that in a rather instinctive way. Humans, however, act consciously and purposefully (e.g. they can first imagine, design and make a plan, before they make the shelter). According to Marx, says Jaggar, it is praxis that is proper or essential to human nature. Praxis is necessarily social and cooperative, because it requires some division of labour amongst people and builds on the accumulative knowledge, skills and experiences of earlier generations in a social context (Jaggar, 1983, pp. 53-54). On this view, 'human nature' is understood as transformative and changeable, which goes against the Naturalistic View, where our human nature is determined by biology in a one-directional manner and can at most be contained.

Given that praxis is essential or proper to human nature, "Marx claims that the specific form of praxis undertaken in a given society determines the fundamental features of that society and of the nature of its inhabitants" (Jaggar, 1983, p. 55). So, we cannot understand humans without considering the specific material circumstances of the society

that determine human capacities, interests, needs and even character.<sup>21</sup> These specific material circumstances also shape society's dominant ideology, which is "the framework of beliefs and values that is generally employed to explain and justify social experience" (Jaggar, 1983, p. 57). The dominant ideology is transmitted through, but also shaped by theories, the legal system, religion, expressions of art, culture, and the ways the members of that society organise their productive activity. This all, again, seeps through to the structures of our daily lives, thereby creating and reinforcing certain human capacities, interests, needs and character traits (Jaggar, 1983, p. 57). In short, the material conditions of society, the dominant ideology and our human 'nature', needs and traits mutually shape, or mutually constitute, each other.

How does this 'dialectical process' apply to competition? Following Jaggar's interpretation of Marx, in societies where capitalist modes of production and ideologies are dominant, individuals are literally pitted against each other. They experience themselves and their fellows as predatory and acquisitive; and they learn that others are potential enemies, all competing for scarce goods. The status quo is falsely believed to be inevitable or 'natural' (and this is precisely why adherents of the Naturalistic View believe that our competitiveness is some kind of biological, evolutionary and unchangeable feature of humans). This belief in the 'naturalness' of our competitive drives

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<sup>21</sup> According to Marxist theories, these specific societal circumstances predominantly include the modes of production that typify the society we live in, but also one's place within the class system (Jaggar, 1983, p. 56).



overshadows our ability to recognise that we are necessarily social and interdependent beings with mutual interests (Jaggar, 1983, pp. 57-58). What's more, the dialectic process can change our human 'nature' completely, with the result that we actually *become* competitive.

Optimistically though, according to the Socio-Historical View, human nature is not an inevitability (as the Naturalistic View professes), but always subject to change. It is the role of social institutions to reform our competitive human nature such that we recognise each other again as interdependent beings with shared interests.

#### **4. A Rousseauian View: Inevitable but Malleable**

I will now present an alternative, Rousseauian View, where our human nature is *inevitable* yet *malleable*. What is so attractive about this view, and contrary to the Naturalistic View and the Socio-Historical View, is that it really gets to the heart of the matter by understanding human competitiveness essentially as a human drive for *recognition* and *esteem*; Rousseau calls this drive '*amour-propre*'. *Amour-propre* is a permanent, inevitable and distinctly *human* drive that is always shaped by our relationships with others and by the broader social and institutional context we live in. It can remain healthy or go awry, depending on societal circumstances. Building on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's insights (1712-1778), I develop a gradual notion of competitiveness that fits within my broader dissertation where I argue that institutions and domains can be organised in such a way that our human drive for recognition and esteem is shaped in a healthy manner.

That is, we can design institutions in such a way that the ethical issues that arise with competition can be avoided and kept in check.

I will first introduce Rousseau's view on human nature and explain what he means by *amour de soi* and *amour-propre* (4.1.). Then, I will distinguish between healthy and inflamed *amour-propre* (4.2.) and analyse the role that socio-historical factors play in shaping our inevitable but malleable *amour-propre* (4.3.). Finally, I will clarify the relevance of all this for my account of competition (4.4.). Throughout the sections I will mostly rely on Rousseau's *Second Discourse: Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Mankind*, or *Discourse on Inequality* (1755/2002) and interpretations of Rousseau's work from Dent and O'Hagan (1998), Neuhouser (2008), Kolodny (2010) and Bertram (2023).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> I cannot write a chapter on Rousseau and human nature without saying anything about his views on women. In *Emile* (1762) he wrote for instance that “[n]ature herself has decreed that woman, both for herself and her children, should be at the mercy of man's judgement” (translation of Rousseau quoted in: Lloyd, 1983, p. 310). Or, in French: “La femme n'existe que par rapport à l'homme, elle est faite pour lui plaire et lui obéir ; ainsi l'a voulu la nature” (Rousseau, 1762/2015, book 5, p. 135). However, the feminist literature on Rousseau and women ranges from calling him a misogynist (Rosenblatt, 2002) to arguing that the “system of strongly differentiated sex roles [as advocated by Rousseau] need not rest on assertions about the inferiority of “otherness” of women's nature” (Weiss, 1987, p. 84). I do not feel in the position to take a stance in this debate. I merely want to point out that everything I say in this chapter about *amour de soi* and *amour-propre* is meant to be gender neutral.

#### 4.1. *The Difference Between Amour de Soi and Amour-Propre*

In the *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau pictures a fictional state of nature where people are mostly solitary and free from societal influences. He theorises about the attributes humans would have, in this state of nature, and envisions which attributes humans would gain in transitioning towards society. His story about the transition from a state of nature to a society never factually happened; people have never lived outside of a social context. His counterfactual story should instead be understood as a philosophical tool to improve our self-understanding as human beings, as it helps to separate natural and artificial elements of our existence (Bertram, 2023).

One attribute that, according to Rousseau, only comes into being in a social setting is *amour-propre*. *Amour-propre* can be defined as “a form of self-love that is the source of the *enduring*, though *malleable*, need human beings have in society to count as someone of value, both in the eyes of others and relative to the value of others” (Neuhaus, 2008, p. 46, emphasis mine).

Rousseau distinguishes *amour-propre* from *amour de soi* or *amour de soi même* – the drive towards self-preservation – which already exists in the state of nature. *Amour de soi* directs us to satisfy our basic biological needs, such as our need for food, warmth and shelter. Just like other animals, humans are equipped to attend to this natural drive for self-preservation. Another attribute that humans already possess in the state of nature, according to Rousseau, is compassion or *pitié*. *Pitié* moves us to alleviate the suffering of others,

including that of animals, as long as our own self-preservation is not in danger. In the *Discourse on Inequality*, *pitié* is mentioned alongside *amour de soi*, whereas in *Emile*, *pitié* arises from *amour de soi*, and is the origin of all other ‘passions’ (Bertram, 2023).

Rousseau describes the difference between the two types of self-love – *amour-propre* and *amour de soi* – as follows:

*Il ne faut confondre l’amour propre & l’amour de soi-même; deux passions très-différentes par leur nature & par leurs effets. L’amour de soi-même est un sentiment naturel qui porte tout animal à veiller à sa propre conservation & qui, dirigé dans l’homme par la raison & modifié par la pitié, produit l’humanité & la vertu. L’amour propre n’est qu’un sentiment relatif, factice, & né dans la société, qui porte chaque individu à faire plus de cas de soi que de tout autre, qui inspire aux hommes tous les maux qu’ils se font mutuellement, & qui est la véritable source de l’honneur.* (Rousseau, 1755/1769, p. 193)<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> This quote is translated as follows:

We must not confuse selfishness with self-love; they are two very distinct passions both in their nature and in their effects. Self-love is a natural sentiment, which inclines every animal to look to his own preservation, and which, guided in man by reason and qualified by pity, is productive of humanity and virtue. Selfishness is but a relative and factitious sentiment, engendered in society, which inclines every individual to set a greater value upon himself than upon any other man, which inspires men with all the

So according to Rousseau, *amour de soi* is natural, whereas *amour-propre* is artificial (*factice*).<sup>24</sup> Yet, following Frederick Neuhouser's interpretation, Rousseau denoting *amour-propre* as 'artificial' simply means he claims it has an inherently *social* character (2008, p. 39). *Amour-propre* is inevitable, not because it is conceptually impossible for humans to lack it, but because it is practically impossible; we've always lived in social groups, so *amour-propre* has practically always been present. Or, as Neuhouser reckons, *amour-propre* is a universally desired end that cannot be extinguished in human beings (2008, p. 46). In a sense, it is inevitably artificial.

This social type of self-love necessarily involves making *comparisons* with one another. Rousseau writes in his *Discourse on Inequality*:

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mischief they do to each other, and is the true source of what we call honor.  
(Rousseau, 1755/2002, p. 146)

It is important to note here, that *amour-propre* has been translated (confusingly) as 'selfishness' and *amour de soi-même* as 'self-love'. However, *amour-propre* and *amour de soi* can *both* be understood as self-love, though different types of self-love. Translating *amour-propre* as 'selfishness' immediately gives it a negative connotation, whereas it doesn't necessarily need to be negative, as will become clear shortly. To fully appreciate the nuances of Rousseau's terms, I will not translate them, but stick to '*amour-propre*' and '*amour de soi*'.

<sup>24</sup> Note that our actions are often driven by *amour de soi* and *amour-propre* simultaneously (Neuhouser, 2008, pp. 31-32).

Ceci bien entendu, je dis que dans notre état primitif, dans le véritable état de nature, l'*amour propre* n'existe pas; car chaque homme en particulier le regardant lui-même comme le seul Spectateur qui l'observe, comme le seul être dans l'univers qui prenne intérêt à lui, comme le seul juge de son propre mérite, *il n'est pas possible qu'un sentiment qui prend sa source dans des comparaisons* qu'il n'est pas à portée de faire, puisse germer dans son âme. (Rousseau, 1755/1769, pp. 193-194, emphasis mine)<sup>25</sup>

So, Rousseau claims that *amour-propre* arises from making comparisons with others, which is impossible in the state of nature, where other people are largely absent. Once we live in social groups, we start to see ourselves, and our merits, through the eyes of others and relative to others. This desire to count as someone of value can remain healthy or go awry though, as the following subsection (4.2.) will show.

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<sup>25</sup> See here the translation:

This position well understood, I say that [*amour-propre*] does not exist in our primitive state, in the true state of nature; for every man in particular considering himself as the only spectator who observes him, as the only being in the universe which takes any interest in him, as the only judge of his own merit, *it is impossible that a sentiment arising from comparisons*, which he is not in a condition to make, should spring up in his mind. (Rousseau, 1755/2002, p. 146, emphasis mine)

#### 4.2. *Difference Between Healthy Amour-Propre and Inflamed Amour-Propre*

In this subsection, I move step by step from healthy to unhealthy forms of *amour-propre*. First, the most fundamental form of healthy *amour-propre* is about recognising one another as equals in virtue of being human. A second, complementary form of healthy *amour-propre* allows for the recognition of one's qualities and merits (such as being an excellent singer), as long as this doesn't undermine our mutual understanding that we are equal as humans. Finally, I move to unhealthy or inflamed forms of *amour-propre*, where one's qualities and talents in one aspect of life are interpreted as one's superior worth as a person. For my research project, it is important to distinguish between these different (gradual) notions of *amour-propre*, because it shows how our desire to count as someone of value in the eyes of others and relative to others is typically human but can also take on different forms (depending on the social context) and start to be the cause of quite some moral problems.

Starting off with the first form of healthy *amour-propre*. In its most innocent form, *amour-propre*'s social or relative character, means having *a* position with respect to others merely as a member of humanity as such. Our desire for relative standing in comparison to others requires primarily that we recognise each other's *equal* standing as humans. *Amour-propre* leads us to pursue respect simply in virtue of being a human and allows us to return respect to others in the same measure (Neuhouser, 2008, p. 34). To respect someone is to see that

person as possessing a set of unalienable and unconditional rights that apply to all (Neuhouser, 2008, p. 65). This is in line with Dent and O'Hagan's position, who argue that anyone's *amour-propre* can be satisfied, simply in virtue of being part of humanity (1998, p. 65). This is also what Niko Kolodny seems to mean by "*moral equality*" in his definition of healthy *amour-propre* as the "desire to have, and to be evaluated by all others as having, a certain value in comparison with all others, including at least *moral equality*" (Kolodny, 2010, p. 170, emphasis his).<sup>26</sup> He understands moral equality as basic worth or standing or equal entitlement to respect.

However, Neuhouser (2008, ch. 2) and Kolodny's (2010, p. 170) both agree that healthy *amour-propre* is compatible with a desire for having one's individual merit confirmed by others, provided that one still regards each other as *at least morally equal*. This brings me to a second, complementary form of healthy *amour-propre*: people not only need recognition in virtue of being human; they also have the need to be recognised for their individual merits. These merits can vary from achievements (having reached the top of the Mount Everest), natural abilities (having grace), cultivated talents (ability to speak a foreign

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<sup>26</sup> Before I mentioned another definition from *amour-propre* proposed by Neuhouser. It's still worth mentioning Kolodny's definition as well, because both contain aspects that are helpful to my analysis of the concept. Neuhouser's definition contains the combination of *endurability* and *malleability*, which is a central point of my analysis of *amour-propre* and competitiveness. Kolodny's definition emphasises "*at least moral equality*", which allows me to present a gradual account of *amour-propre* (and later on, competitiveness), as will become clear later on.



language fluently), purely innate characteristics (having beautiful eyes) to distinctly moral attributes (being virtuous). The need for having our individual merit confirmed by others is not necessarily bad. It can be an important source of (self-)esteem and a motivational force that contributes to the wellbeing of all (Neuhouser, 2008, pp. 64-68). You may be a skilled painter and I might be fluent in 3 languages, but this doesn't necessarily undermine our mutual understanding that we are morally equal.

Yet, due to societal influences (which I will explain in the following section), *amour-propre* can go awry, that is, it can become unhealthy or inflamed. Following Kolodny, inflamed *amour-propre* is a “desire to have, and to be evaluated by all others as having, a certain value in comparison with all others, including at least ever greater *moral superiority*” (2010, p. 170, emphasis his). Someone feels *morally* superior to someone else if the former believes that the other should be accorded less or no respect in virtue of certain attributes (such as, being ‘ugly’ or poor). This essentially means that someone’s personal worth, someone’s value as a human being, is believed to go hand in hand with particular goods or attributes. These goods include social class, property and political power. Your personal worth is then measured by the kinds of visible goods and qualities you have, such as the work you do or the property you own. These goods are also positional since their value is determined by how they are ranked relative to alternatives (Kolodny, 2010, p. 171). Following Kolodny, “[i]f we believe that the only way to be evaluated as superior involves both moral superiority and social advantage, then this desire will express itself in inflamed *amour-propre*

and Competition for Social Advantage” (2010, pp. 179-180). So, people whose *amour-propre* is inflamed believe that personal worth is determined by someone’s achievements, possessions and socio-economic status. They think that the way to prove one’s personal worth is to enter into competitions with others.

Consequently, Kolodny notes, inflamed *amour-propre* is often associated with a disposition to the vice of pride and vice of shame. Pride not only consists in believing that one is (morally) superior to others, but also in rejecting judgements about one’s own inferiority or equality in comparison to others. Shame consists in believing oneself inferior and failing to stand up for oneself when being evaluated as inferior – which is still compatible with a desire for superiority. Inflamed *amour-propre* is also associated with other vices, such as being hostile, uncharitable and deceitful. Finally, but importantly, those whose *amour-propre* is inflamed are unfree: they are trapped in an endless rat race for superior status that can never, or only temporarily, be satisfied and they are constantly dependent on the positive appraisals of others (Kolodny, 2010, pp. 171-172).

A social and political theory that aims to do justice to the potential problems that *amour-propre* can bring about requires us to investigate how institutions can be organised in such a way that they prevent *amour-propre* from becoming inflamed and thus from having negative excesses while providing people with enough opportunities to satisfy this inevitable drive for recognition (Neuhouser, 2008, p. 71).

### 4.3. *The Role of Institutions*

In this subsection, I will show how *amour-propre* is shaped by socio-historical and institutional factors. I will first explain how society can corrupt our drive for recognition, by looking at Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*. Then I will mention some Rousseauian insights on how institutions can avoid *amour-propre*'s negative excesses and steer our drives in the right direction.

Society's corrupting impact is illustrated in a passage from the *Discourse on Inequality* where humans move from the (fictional) state of nature to an unequal and unfree human society. Crucial in this development is the introduction of private property, which brings about social inequalities and all kinds of evils. "The first man, who after enclosing a piece of ground, took it into his head to say, *this is mine*, and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society," Rousseau says (1755/2002, p. 113). Yet, there are several steps that precede the idea of private property. At first, our *amour-propre* was still dormant, but it gradually got to a point where it became inflamed and turned into a competitive drive so strong it went at the cost of others and ourselves.

The first step of human existence that Rousseau describes, is that of humans learning to surmount the obstacles of their natural environment, for instance to obtain food. As a result, the species became more numerous. Humans started to see that other men and women were similar to themselves. To improve their own wellbeing, they entered in competition with the ones who formed a threat to the satisfaction of

their own interests. These competitions could either be won by force or by cunning. They simultaneously formed communities with the people who provided them assistance and support (Rousseau, 1755/2002, pp. 115-116). Families were formed and – as people became more enlightened and industrious – the houses they built became their property. The tools people invented led to the creation of surplus and gave them more leisure time. As people’s lives became more and more comfortable, an increasing number of needs were created as well. The satisfaction of these new needs only brought little pleasure and only led to the creation of ever more needs.<sup>27</sup> Crucially for Rousseau, this step is the source of evil which would be passed on to all the following generations (Rousseau, 1755/2002, pp. 116-117).

Next, different families started living together. As one saw each other regularly, one began to make comparisons with one another, and *amour-propre* manifested itself more regularly. Ideas about merit and beauty created feelings of preference and jealousy. Public esteem became important and could be obtained by being the most handsome, the best dancer, the strongest, et cetera. This, however, also led to vice, envy and shame. It was the first step towards further ‘moral’ (and socio-political) inequalities, Rousseau says (1755/2002, p. 118), which go beyond mere physical inequalities. These socio-political inequalities are the product of man-made (tacit) agreements on what counts as

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<sup>27</sup> Note the parallel here with the Marxist version of the Social-Historical View from section 3, where it was argued that biological and social aspects of human existence mutually constitute one another.

meritorious and what doesn't (Neuhouser, 2008, p. 40). People with certain talents focussed on the tasks that suited them best and they produced more than was necessarily needed for survival. Money was introduced and men became ever more dependent on each other's assistance (Rousseau, 1755/2002, pp. 120-122).

A new order of things came into place in which one's rank became important. One's position on that ranking was constituted by the amount of property and power people had, but also on qualities that could command such a respectable status, such as beauty, skill, strength, genius and several talents. It became in people's interest to appear better than they really were and the distinction between 'to be' and 'to seem' engendered all kinds of vices (Rousseau, 1755/2002, p. 122). The development of *amour-propre* has led to the following, lamentable situation:

[A]n insatiable ambition, the rage of raising their relative fortunes, not so much through real necessity [but] to overtop others, inspires all men with a wicked inclination to injure each other, and with a secret jealousy so much the more dangerous, as to carry its point with the greater security it often puts on the mask of benevolence. In a word, competition and rivalry on the one hand, and an opposition of interests on the other, and always a secret desire of profiting at the expense of others. Such were the first effects of property, and the inseparable attendants of nascent inequality. (Rousseau, 1755/2002, p. 123)

Rousseau goes on:

[T]his universal desire for reputation, honours and advancement, which inflames us all, exercises and holds up to comparison our faculties and powers; how it excites and multiplies our passions, and, by creating universal competition and rivalry, or rather, enmity, among men, occasions numberless failures, successes and disturbances of all kinds by making so many aspirants run the same course. (Rousseau, 1755/2002, p. 134)

This succession of steps illustrates how *amour-propre* can develop from an innocuous tendency to see oneself through the eyes of others to an intense competition for status, prestige and power. While our quest for esteem and recognition is not necessarily morally problematic, as long as there is at least moral equality, specific socio-economic conditions set the stage for excessive forms of *amour-propre*.

Fredrick Neuhausser's interpretation of the *Discourse on Inequality* is particularly helpful in mapping out which specific conditions led to the inflammation of *amour-propre*. He identifies four such socio-economic, 'accidental' (i.e. contingent) conditions. First, due to surplus created by improved methods of production, humans got introduced to the pleasures of luxury and leisure. Second, the increasing material division of labour made people more dependent on each other for the satisfaction of their needs; the carpenter depends on the shoemaker for the reparation of its footwear and the shoemaker depends

on the carpenter for the construction of its roof. Third, private property was introduced, in particular in the form of land ownership. Finally, individuals' characters, circumstances and possessions increasingly differentiated due to a combination of differences in terms of effort, luck and natural endowment. These conditions brought about the inflammation of *amour-propre* and played a role in creating new possibilities for inequalities that took root in society and the way people relate to each other (Neuhouser, 2008, pp. 121-124).

These conditions mutually reinforced each other. The creation of surplus and the introduction of private property brought about leisure and luxury, which, in turn made 'looking' and 'too be looked at' an important pastime. Increased differentiation and mutual dependence created more and new ways of finding superior standing. Old strategies of striving to be the best dancer or singer are now supplemented by the possibility to exploit the other's dependence (Neuhouser, 2008, pp. 121-124). In the unequal society that arises, people's need for recognition, but also their need for material goods such as food, have become entangled with social relations. Moral inequalities become institutionalised in terms of power and wealth. This all has a negative effect on people's freedom: superiors are dependent on their subordinates' work and recognition and subordinates are dependent on their superiors for their survival. These inequalities and exploitative social relations are also backed by the state.<sup>28</sup> Rousseau argues that this is a class state where the propertied and rich impose unfreedom and

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<sup>28</sup> Think of property law and exploitative work contracts for instance.

subordination on the weak and poor. The propertyless consent, because they are afraid of a state of war and fail to see how this establishment systematically disadvantages them (Bertram, 2023).<sup>29</sup>

However, given the contingency of the beforementioned conditions, and given the plasticity of *amour-propre*, society could have looked very differently under different conditions. Rousseau himself even holds it to be possible that social life can be organised in such a way that *amour-propre* takes on a benign character (Bertram, 2023). In the following quote from the *Discourse on Inequality*, Neuhouser sees room for institutions to reform people's *amour-propre*:

The rank and fate of each man established, not only on the quantity of goods and the power to serve or harm, but also on the mind, beauty, strength, or skill, on merit or talents. *And these qualities being the only ones that were able to attract consideration*, it soon became necessary either to have or to affect them. (Rousseau, 1755/2002, p. 122; Neuhouser, 2008, p. 126, emphasis his)

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<sup>29</sup> In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau aims to develop an alternative to the dystopia explained in the *Discourse on Inequality*. By introducing the concept of the general will as the source of law, which is also willed by every citizen, Rousseau claims that we can live under the protection of a common force, while also being as free as we were in the state of nature (Bertram, 2023). The details of this proposal are not relevant for my purposes.



The highlighted sentence suggests, according to Neuhausser, that every society makes certain options for recognition available to people while it precludes others. These options shape how individuals will try to satisfy their desire to count as someone in the eyes of others or relative to others. If healthy forms of recognition are made available by institutions, then inflamed *amour-propre* might be avoided and remedied (Neuhausser, 2008, p. 126).

Based on Neuhausser's (2008) insights, I identify three ways in which healthy forms of recognition can be made available by institutions that are still relevant today: (1) Good institutions are organised in such a way that they recognise everyone equally in virtue of being human. No one is 'above' the law and everyone should be treated with equal respect (cf. Neuhausser, 2008, p. 168). (2) Good institutions provide enough opportunities for everyone to excel, and receive esteem, in at least one domain or practice. It should also be made clear that being excellent at something does not necessarily prevent others from also being excellent at that same thing (cf. Neuhausser, 2008, p. 101). (3) Given that natural differences between people are arbitrarily translated in disproportionate social differences (in wealth, power and status), good institutions minimise, though not necessarily eliminate, the gap between the rich and the poor, such that nobody is in the position to (systematically) subjugate the other (cf. Neuhausser, 2008, p. 164).

#### 4.4. Implications for my Analysis of Competition

This subsection formulates a couple of take aways for my view on competition. I will first make a conceptual remark (that builds on subsection 4.1.), followed by a comment on how my gradual interpretation of *amour-propre* (as explained in 4.2.) informs my gradual account of competition. I finish with four implications for competition at the institutional level (inspired by insights from 4.3.). Importantly, I aim to depart from the pessimistic view on the state of society that Rousseau presents in the *Discourse on Inequality* and develop an optimistic and constructive institutional account in which *amour-propre* can develop in a healthy way; my account, however, doesn't rely on Rousseau's controversial notion of *volonté générale* (or, general will) which he develops in *The Social Contract* (for more information on the general will, see also: Bertram, 2023).

Regarding the conceptual remark (4.1), how does Rousseau's notion of *amour-propre* fit within my definition of competition? Both Rousseau's understanding of *amour-propre* and my definition of competition involve making comparisons and evaluative judgements. The difference, however, is that *amour-propre* is an inevitable but malleable *psychological drive*, while competition involves institutional *rules* and *procedures*. We can assume that all participants of a competition have *amour-propre*, but how this need to count as someone of value, both in the eyes of others and relative to the value of others, is shaped and satisfied depends largely on how the rules and procedures of the competition are set up.

We have seen in subsection 4.2. that *amour-propre* is not an ‘on’ or ‘off’ matter, where you either have it or don’t have it. Instead, we have seen that everyone inevitably has *amour-propre*, but how it develops and whether it becomes inflamed is a matter of degree. This gradual account of *amour-propre* ranges (a) from a desire to be seen as a moral equal, (b) to a desire to be seen as a moral equal that is compatible with having one’s individual merits confirmed by others (c) and to its inflamed versions, ranging from a desire to be superior to others to a desire to actively harm others and bring them down. This multifaceted and gradual notion of *amour-propre* is important for my account of competition, which is also gradual and ranges from (i) having no competition at all to (ii) having a mild form of competition that still allows participants to treat each other as moral equals to (iii) intense forms of competition that inflame people’s *amour-propre*. Given that competitive selection and allocation mechanisms per definition compare candidates and aim to identify which of them can claim the desired status of ‘winner’, according to certain criteria, we should ask ourselves to what extent and in what ways such mechanisms can still foster healthy forms of *amour-propre*.

For an example of (i), no competition at all, consider a workgroup at an educational institution that is being tasked with making the curriculum more diverse and inclusive. During a work meeting, it is announced that those who are interested in making the curriculum more diverse and inclusive can sign up for this group. No competitive selection procedures are in place; everyone who wants to contribute is welcome to contribute. Once the workgroup is formed, the different

members discuss each other's qualities and express which qualities they still want to develop. Based on this inventory, the tasks are distributed amongst those who already have (some) experience in that specific task, who are then paired with those who want to learn more about that task. Everyone's qualities and contributions are valued and the team members work together towards the common goal of making the curriculum more diverse and inclusive.

An example of (ii), a moderate competition, is the competition for a job in the IT-sector. Let's assume that there are lots of IT-jobs on offer relative to the number of people who want a job in IT and are qualified for it as well. The job in question is scarce – only *one* candidate can obtain it – but the kind of job is not scarce – there are plenty of similar jobs on offer. So, failing to obtain (win) that one job still leaves candidates with plenty of opportunities to get the kind of job they want. Importantly for my point on *amour-propre*, given the multiplicity of competitions for IT-jobs, there are enough possibilities to have one's individual merit confirmed in one of those many instances of competition without undermining one's equal standing as humans.

An example of (iii), competition that is likely to inflame *amour-propre*, are competitions that are so all-encompassing and high stakes that one's position on each of these rankings gets confused with one's worth as a person. Take exams like the Cito-toets in the Netherlands. Children make this exam at the end of primary school, when they're about 12 years old, and the outcome largely determines their future path. The exam serves as a sorting machine, as it were, where the ones who scored 'best' on the exam are deemed the most intelligent and

continue their educational path at the ‘higher’ educational levels of mid- and high school and are thereby more likely have a successful career ahead of them. Those who scored ‘lower’ on the exam, in turn, are deemed not so intelligent, continue their educational path at a ‘lower’ level and will eventually end up with less prestigious and worse paying jobs. In such competitions it is much harder *not* to confuse your worth with your relative score; they can even incite jealousy, dishonesty and a snobbish attitude in people. Worse even, such high-stake competitions make us unfree, because we are trapped in an all-encompassing system where one’s future is under threat, so children and parents will do everything they can to increase their chances of ‘making it’.

Finally, building on subsection 4.3., I aim to expand on Rousseau’s work by developing a positive and constructive account of how (competitive) institutions can foster the healthy development of *amour-propre*. My first two points are about how institutions can foster recognition and esteem in *non-competitive ways*. The last two points concern how institutions can promote recognition and esteem in *competitive ways*.

First, our dignity as human beings should never be the object of competition. Institutions can and should guarantee at least *moral equality* between its members (cf. Kolodny’s definition of *amour-propre* that includes *at least moral equality* and Neuhausser’s point that good institutions recognise everyone equally in virtue of being human). People are recognised and respected as humans, as having a relationship of equal worth with one another, with the rights and liberties that go along with it. Political institutions, such as (trans)national governments,

formulate basic human and civil rights – think for instance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and national constitutions – and promote and enforce its compliance.

Second, there should be enough opportunities available for people to receive recognition for their individual qualities that are still outside of the competitive sphere. This is in line with Neuhouser’s point that good institutions provide people with enough opportunities to excel and receive esteem. Your individual qualities as a good father, loyal colleague or excellent dancer can be confirmed at the same time as someone else’s. Comparisons with others *can* be made, but they don’t need to serve as a way to outperform others, but rather as a way to learn from each other.

Third, in some contexts, the competitive drive to do *better* than others can and should be permitted and can even bring about positive consequences. It can motivate people to work harder to develop their talents, for example. And being good at something, better than others, can be a source of recognition and esteem. For instance, how ‘good’ my IT skills are depends on the IT skills of the other candidates for a particular job. If I stand out in comparison to the others, I win the competition and get the job, with the recognition and esteem that come with it. In the normative part of my dissertation, chapters 4, 5 and 6, I will develop a framework to assess whether and under which conditions competitions remain healthy or go awry.

Fourth, giving rewards to the winner of a particular competition can be morally permissible, even if this leads to *some* inequalities between winners and losers. The winner of a job competition can make

a legitimate claim on the advertised job, plus, perhaps an increased salary, status and recognition. However, inspired by Rousseau's insights, these rewards should never be so high that the 'winners' can exploit and subjugate the 'losers'. Likewise, the losses should not be so big that the 'losers' cannot do otherwise but to accept the rules and the conditions of the competitions that are so disadvantageous to them. Institutions play an important role in setting the boundaries of these competitions; boundaries which I will explore in chapter 5.

## 5. Conclusion

This chapter aims to show that human competitiveness is not merely an amoral, 'natural' fact of life that should be kept outside of the sphere of morality. Instead, I defended a Rousseauian view of human nature, where our drive to seek recognition from others and relative to others is permanent, inevitable and distinctly *human*, but is also always shaped in relationship with others, in a broader socio-institutional context. There is a fine line between the healthy desire for recognition and the destructive drive for superiority. The lessons learnt from Rousseau's concept of *amour-propre* are helpful for the development of my own gradual account of competition and competitiveness. This gradual account paves the way for the idea that institutions have the opportunity and task to shape our inevitable yet malleable *amour-propre*, while holding its negative excesses in check. In the remainder of this dissertation, I expand on the role of (competitive) institutions.

In chapter 4, I will build on Rousseau's observation that, in competitive settings, a discrepancy tends to emerge between 'to be' and 'to seem' (Rousseau, 1755/2002, pp. 122-123). In competitions, there is a real risk of competitors becoming more concerned with tokens of success (getting a high score on a test, having a nice car or dressing in a certain way) than with actually becoming good at the activity itself (gaining knowledge in school, being good at your job, et cetera). I will argue that competition tends to direct people's attention and efforts to what are called 'external goods' (such as money, status and prestige) at the cost of what are called 'internal goods'.

In chapter 5, Rousseau's notion of *amour-propre* will return when I analyse the ways in which competition can affect (self-)esteem. In that chapter, I will argue that competitive arrangements, compared to non-competitive arrangements, tend to harm the 'losers'. Not only are they excluded from scarce goods, they are excluded on the basis of them *not being good enough* (according to relevant criteria).

In chapter 6 I tie the different chapters together and develop a framework that can help us assess in a gradual manner competition's downsides in concrete and specific cases.



# Chapter 4: Institutions, Practices and Corruption

## 1. Introduction

After formulating my definition of competition (in chapter 2) and establishing that institutions play a crucial role in shaping our inevitable yet malleable desire for esteem and recognition (in chapter 3), we now arrived at the normative part of my research. Over the course of chapters 4 and 5, I aim to provide answers to my main research question: what, if anything, makes competition morally problematic and how do these moral problems inform our ethical evaluations of specific competitions in concrete domains and practices? In this current chapter I develop what I call ‘the Corruption Argument’.<sup>30</sup> In the following chapter I will develop what I call ‘the Harm Argument’.

In a nutshell, the Corruption Argument goes as follows: the introduction or the intensification of competition at the institutional level tends to corrupt the practices that are embedded in that institution. In other words, making increased use of competitive arrangements can go at the cost of those things we deem indispensable to a practice (its internal goods). In support of my Corruption Argument, I heavily rely

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<sup>30</sup> Note that part of this argument has already been published in a peer-reviewed journal under the title *Competition and its tendency to corrupt philosophy* (Drissen, 2022). Especially sections 2 till 4 overlap with the paper.

on Alasdair MacIntyre's 1981 book *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, where he also speaks of "the corrupting power of institutions" (2007, p. 194). Especially his terms 'practice' (section 2), 'internal' and 'external goods' (section 3), virtue (section 4) and his notion of 'institution' (section 5) will enable me to investigate the ways in which institutions can become increasingly competitive, up to the point that internal goods are sacrificed, that is, up to the point that practices are corrupted (section 6). To illustrate my points throughout the sections, I will refer to and build on one example that I call 'Philosophy'. I chose this example, because I am familiar with it, but my points are relevant across practices.

Once these MacIntyrean institutional mechanisms are clear, I move to the empirical literature: are there any studies to support my argument that competition corrupts practices? There is already a substantial literature in philosophy and behavioural economics on the corrupting effects of monetary incentives. In section 7, I draw relevant parallels between Sandel's version of the corruption argument in the context of financial incentives and my Corruption Argument in the context of competition. I will also cite some empirical studies on the impact of competitive incentives. While these studies won't be full-blown proofs for the ways in which corruption manifests itself, they do make my claims on the corrupting effects of competition more plausible. In section 8, I conclude the chapter.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> My Corruption Argument fits within a broader literature on the virtues and the ills of market society. For instance, in his classic paper *Rival Interpretations of Market*

## 2. Practices and Cooperation

The first term that I borrow from MacIntyre to build my Corruption Argument is *practice*, which he describes as

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of

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*Society: Civilizing, Destructive, or Feeble?* (1982), Albert O. Hirschman distinguishes between two dominant positions in the debate on market society: the *doux-commerce* thesis and the self-destruction thesis. Following the *doux-commerce* thesis, “Commerce is [...] seen as a powerful moralizing agent which brings many nonmaterial improvements to society even though a bit of hypocrisy may have to be accepted into the bargain” (Hirschman, 1982, p. 1465). Thinkers like David Hume and Adam Smith believed that virtues like industriousness, frugality, punctuality and probity were enhanced by the commerce that takes place in market societies (Hirschman, 1982, p. 1465). On the contrary, the self-destruction thesis holds that capitalist market society, “far from fostering *douceur* and other fine attitudes, exhibits a pronounced proclivity toward undermining the moral foundations on which any society [...] must rest” (Hirschman, 1982, p. 1466). Following Wells and Graafland (2012, p. 320), Alasdair MacIntyre can be put in the ‘camp’ of the self-destruction thesis. In the context of my dissertation, however, I leave such macro-level discussions on market society aside, as this might distract the reader from my specific focus on *competition* (which exists within, but also outside market settings), and how it affects *practices*.

the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.  
(MacIntyre, 2007, p. 187)

According to MacIntyre, throwing a ball with skill is not a practice, but the game of football is. Planting tubers is not a practice, but farming is. Bricklaying is not a practice, but architecture is (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 187). Friendship is a practice, according to him (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 190), not a random act of kindness towards a person. Philosophy is a practice and as such is different than merely sharing your opinion about, say, abortion.

Two important elements of MacIntyre's definition of practice are *cooperation* and *internal goods* (the latter will be discussed in section 3). While he doesn't explicitly define 'cooperation', it seems to refer to a shared sense of what the rules, the purpose and standards of the practice are, beyond just agreeing on them as self-interested individuals. It is about a shared commitment and care for these standards and rules and the continuation of them. Cooperation has an important historical dimension where practitioners build on knowledge and skills from past generations (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 190).

To illustrate this cooperative aspect, let me refer to an oft-used example by MacIntyre: the game of chess. This practice is cooperative as well as competitive, but on different levels. As we've seen in chapter 2, *competitive* rules constitute of the practice of chess; it is part of the rules that one can win by employing certain strategies to checkmate the opponent. However, the level at which *cooperation* takes place is equally important. Institutions and a community of chess-players

collectively respect and pass on the rules from one generation to the next. Chess has been played and perfected over time with new players joining and gaining skills and knowledge via chess clubs, tournaments, books and, nowadays, online communities. This example shows that the practice's cooperative and competitive aspects can very well go hand in hand and even support each other: the competitive rules and standards need to be upheld in a cooperative way. Without this kind of cooperative attitude, a joint sense of respecting and upholding these rules and standards, the practice would cease to exist.

Philosophy, too, has this crucial cooperative element. Let me illustrate:

**Philosophy (cooperation).** This practice has a long history of thinkers where knowledge, wisdom and skills are transmitted from one generation to the next. In their efforts to acquire greater knowledge, wisdom and/or get closer to the truth, practitioners situate themselves in and build on a tradition with their own methods and jargon, for example in the fields of morality, political philosophy, epistemology, philosophy of science, philosophy of mind, metaphysics, aesthetics, logic, existentialism or critical theory. They reflect on and respond to one another's work, whilst having a (more or less) shared understanding of, respect for and dedication to standards and

rules on what constitutes ‘good’ philosophy, which, in turn, is transmitted to students (i.e. potential future philosophers).<sup>32</sup>

Some might argue that, just like chess, philosophy is essentially cooperative *and* competitive in nature, but on different levels. In order to move the philosophical debate forward philosophers must engage in a *battle of ideas* and *challenge* each other’s arguments. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Drissen, 2022), the idea that competition is constitutive of the practice of philosophy relies on the persistent misconception that arguments are ‘war-like’. In line with Hundleby (2021), I argued that contemporary (largely ‘analytic’) philosophy fits within a broader Adversary Paradigm which “demands aggressive opposition to other people’s opinion”. The paper flags the danger of the Adversarial Paradigm *as a paradigm* (see also Moulton, 1983, p. 153), which is the belief that competition and adversarial reasoning are inherent to philosophy and the *only* way of getting closer to the truth and acquiring greater wisdom and knowledge. I made the case, instead, that acquiring wisdom and knowledge and getting closer to the truth is pre-eminently a *cooperative* and not a competitive endeavour (Drissen, 2022). I won’t go deeper into the argument here because that would turn this chapter into a chapter about philosophy, whereas the Philosophy

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<sup>32</sup> I am aware that what we regard as ‘good philosophy’ – including its standards and rules – is rooted in contingent power structures that might exclude certain people and certain ways of doing philosophy. I aim to keep my example of Philosophy broad enough as to include ‘continental’ and ‘analytic’ styles, as well as non-Western ways of practicing philosophy.

example is merely meant to illustrate key concepts to build my Corruption Argument. Two of such concepts are ‘internal goods’ and ‘external goods’, the topics of next section.

### **3. Internal Goods versus External Goods**

As we have seen, a practice is a “coherent and complex form of socially established *cooperative* human activity through which *goods internal* to that form of activity are realized [...]” (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 187, emphasis mine). MacIntyre contrasts internal goods with external goods. Let me discuss them one by one.

*Internal goods* refer to things that are inextricably (rather than contingently) connected to a practice. By means of the various examples MacIntyre uses, one can get a grasp of this layered term. One of these examples is, again, chess. Goods can be called ‘internal’ to a practice for two reasons, firstly:

because we can only specify them in terms of chess or some other game of that specific kind and by means of example from such games [...] and secondly because they can only be identified and recognized by the experience of participating in the practice in question. Those who lack the relevant experience are incompetent thereby as judges of internal goods. (MacIntyre, 2007, pp. 188-189)

Getting better at chess requires the achievement of strategic imagination, a certain competitive intensity, acquiring and improving analytical skill and internalising a set of moves that can be helpful at excelling in whatever a particular game of chess demands. Someone improving at chess means that that person realises more of its internal goods (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 188).

MacIntyre distinguishes two types of internal goods, which he illustrates with the practice of portrait painting (MacIntyre, 2007, pp. 189-190): First, there is the excellence of the products of the practice at hand. In the case of painting, this includes both the excellence of the portrait itself, but also the performance by the painter. The artist's performance can only be judged in the light of certain standards of excellence and within the limits of certain rules, both of which are shared by a large community of practitioners and have historically developed as such. In Europe's Middle Ages, a portrait was supposed to look in a certain way, but what is considered 'excellent' evolved and changed over time. This progress is not a straightforward and linear development and can only move forward by people actually participating in the practice itself.

The second type of internal good is what practitioners discover through the practice itself. In the case of painting, this refers to what practitioners discover while pursuing excellence. This second type of internal good can only be obtained and (fully) experienced and understood by devoting a bigger or smaller part of your life to a practice and actually participating in it, e.g. by becoming and living as a portrait painter (MacIntyre, 2007, pp. 189-190). I interpret this type of internal



good as the unique, practice-dependent experience one has when participating in a specific practice, regardless of whether participation leads to contingent rewards such as money and status. It is something you wouldn't have known or gone through if you wouldn't have participated in the practice.

Let me identify Philosophy's internal goods:

**Philosophy (internal goods).** Excellence in the practice of philosophy involves an increased understanding of the world and ourselves. This requires writing, presentation and reading skills; the capacity to balance reason and emotion; the ability to listen to others; a curiosity and drive to get closer to the truth and acquire wisdom; a sense of humility and awareness of the possibility that one might be mistaken; and a comprehensive understanding of past and present philosophical insights and debates, passing them on and adding to them.

In addition, there is the internal good of what philosophers discover by participating in the practice itself. For those who have never personally engaged in philosophy, this internal good will not be (fully) accessible, but I can still try to give a glimpse of what philosophers discover through the practice. Reading the work of present and past philosophers, discussing ideas with colleagues and receiving and giving feedback (which can be frustrating, insightful and satisfying experiences) can eventually

lead to more nuanced and better-founded visions you wouldn't have had if you hadn't participated in the practice of philosophy.

*External goods* in turn, are those things that are not necessarily but *contingently* attached to a practice and depend on social circumstances. A tutor can decide to reward a child who wins a game of chess with candy, but the child could have gotten something else as well, such as a pat on the back, or nothing at all. Other examples of such contingent external goods are money, prestige and status (MacIntyre, 2007, pp. 188-190).<sup>33</sup>

Apart from their contingent connection to practices, external goods are typically also someone's *possession* and they are *mutually exclusive* (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 190), or 'rival', as economists would call it.<sup>34</sup> The more status and power I 'possess' or have, the less there is 'left' for others. Likewise, the more money I possess, the less purchasing power you have, relatively speaking. While internal goods benefit a

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<sup>33</sup> In my definition of competition, I use the word 'scarce goods', whereas MacIntyre uses 'external goods'. In this chapter, I use them interchangeably.

<sup>34</sup> MacIntyre makes a stronger claim by saying that external goods are *always* someone's possession and *characteristically* mutually exclusive (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 190). While this might be true, this doesn't provide a clear contrast with internal goods since internal goods, too, can be someone's property and mutually exclusive. Think of a painter who owns its own (excellent) product but gives or sells it to someone else. One person owning it excludes others from having it; it is mutually exclusive. What captures the difference between internal and external goods best, therefore, is by labelling the first one as *inherently* and the second one as *contingently* part of the practice.

whole community (everyone can enjoy and learn from an excellent paper or a painting in a museum), external goods only benefit a few, at the expense of others. According to MacIntyre, “[e]xternal goods are therefore characteristically objects of competition in which there must be losers as well as winners” (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 190).

However, in response to MacIntyre I would say that he is too quick to conclude that external goods are *therefore* characteristically objects of competition. It is not clear from MacIntyre’s text whether external goods can *only* be obtained or distributed competitively or whether this can be done in a different manner as well. This is important, because the possibility to obtain and distribute external goods in various ways creates the institutional space to do things differently. For example, the external, scarce good of money *can* be allocated competitively but it can also be allocated by means of, say, a lottery or in a need-based manner. And the tutor can decide to give candy (or any other external good) to the child independently of who wins at chess.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Even after my attempt to clarify MacIntyre’s terms, there are still some questions left. Is power always an external good, even to a practice like politics, where power seems to be an inextricable element part of it? Moreover, even though external goods are contingently connected to a practice, this doesn’t mean they’re not intimately connected to it. For instance, being excellent at, say, chess, likely comes with prestige. This is an external good, because what we consider as worthy of prestige in our society is contingent, but it is nevertheless very intimately related to chess. This is my way of making sense of MacIntyre’s terms anyway.

When looking at Philosophy, we can identify the following external goods:

**Philosophy (external goods).** Goods external to the practice of doing philosophy are, for instance, money, status and prestige. These are contingently connected to it, as on socio-economic circumstances determine who gets how much of them. The external good of funding *can* be distributed competitively (for example, by comparing philosophers' publication record) but it can also be distributed otherwise. The external goods of status and prestige are contingent to the extent that what counts as worthy of status/prestige depends on socio-economic circumstances (now publishing in A-journals is worthy of prestige, but before it was something else).

MacIntyre notes that, while external goods are genuine *goods* that people desire and that can lead to the virtues of generosity and justice, he adds that “if in a particular society the pursuit of external goods were to become dominant, the concept of the virtues might suffer first attrition and then perhaps something near total effacement” (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 196). To understand what he means by this phrase in relation to his notions of practices, internal and external goods and, later on, institutions, it is crucial that we take a closer look at *virtue*, the topic of next section.

#### 4. Virtue

Essential for MacIntyre's thinking is the possession and exercise of the *virtues*. Following Aristotelian virtue ethics, MacIntyre sees it as mankind's goal or *telos* in life to achieve *eudaimonia*, which he describes as "blessedness, happiness, prosperity. It is the state of being well and doing well, of a man's being well-favoured himself and in relation to the divine" (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 148). One can achieve this state by practicing and developing the virtues, which are "precisely those qualities the possession of which will enable an individual to achieve *eudaimonia* and the lack of which will frustrate his movement toward that *telos*" (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 148).

Important towards this end or *telos* is the achievement of practices' internal goods, which, in turn, requires the possession and exercise of virtues (Chu & Moore, 2020, pp. 222-223). Likewise, a lack of such virtues prevents us from achieving internal goods. Or, in MacIntyre's words: "it is not difficult to show for a whole range of key virtues that without them the goods internal to practices are barred to us" (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 191). To illustrate, cheating would be considered a vice rather than a virtue. Hence, cheating at a game of chess renders the game pointless – except, perhaps, as a way to achieve external goods – as the player in question won't learn anything about

chess and will be barred from realising its internal goods (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 191).<sup>36</sup>

Importantly, according to MacIntyre, virtues are not simply instrumental for obtaining the practice's internal goods; they are constitutive to it. Practices are cooperative endeavours which are socially embedded, so people who share a practice consciously define their relationship to one another by reference to the standards of the virtues, such as truthfulness and trust, justice and courage. For example, realising chess' internal goods is not simply about getting better at the various techniques. It is about playing in a truthful manner; about listening carefully to colleagues and opponents and trusting that they will point out inadequacies in one's own play; and about learning to recognise who is owed what in the game (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 191). The exercise of the virtues constitutes the realisation of the practice's internal goods, which in turn brings us closer to achieving *eudaimonia*.

When we look at Philosophy we can also distinguish several virtues:

**Philosophy (virtues).** Virtues that are important for the practice of philosophy are, for example, truthfulness, (intellectual) humility and openness. A virtuous philosopher does not simply care about the truth in an instrumental way, but *genuinely* cares

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<sup>36</sup> Note that, while virtue is required to obtain internal goods, this does not mean that, say, great chess players cannot be mean-spirited or vicious. This is just, according to MacIntyre, that they rely heavily on other people's virtues in order to flourish in the practice they are engaged in (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 193).

about sharing truths rather than falsehoods and understands its importance. The same counts for the other virtues. Becoming a philosopher involves the *continuous practice* of one's (intellectual) humility and openness. These virtues, exercised in cooperation with others, are part of what it means to realise internal goods of philosophy.

According to MacIntyre, virtues stand in a different relationship to internal goods than to external goods, as the possession of virtues might perfectly hinder the achievement of this latter type of goods. As I mentioned earlier, external goods are genuine *goods*, as they are typically the objects of human desire. It would be hypocritical to despise them altogether, MacIntyre says. Notoriously, however, fostering the virtues of truthfulness, justice and courage all too often impedes us from becoming rich or powerful (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 196). It is to be expected, therefore, that “if in a particular society the pursuit of external goods were to become dominant, the concept of the virtues might suffer first attrition and then perhaps something near total effacement” (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 196). Within MacIntyre's framework, it is typically the task of *institutions* in modern, liberal, individualist societies to obtain external goods. This brings us to the final key concept of my argument: institutions.

## 5. Institutions

MacIntyre conceptualises institutions as “the social bearers of the practice” (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 194). Practices and institutions should not be confused, he notes. “Chess, physics and medicine are practices; chess clubs, laboratories, universities and hospitals are institutions” (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 194). Making and sustaining family life is another example of a practice (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 188; Moore, 2011, p. 50) and is institutionalised through arrangements such as marriage, taxation and allowances (Moore, 2011, p. 50). MacIntyre also recognises the institution of the market (2007, p. 222) and political institutions, such as governments and the judicial system (2007, pp. 195, 254-255). These institutions house many different practices where people *as* businesspeople, employees, students, family members, citizens et cetera participate as practitioners.

The practice of Philosophy is also embedded in an institution:

**Philosophy (institution).** The institution of the university bears different social practices, one of which is the practice of philosophy (examples of other practices that the institution of the university bears are economics and physics). To facilitate and sustain this practice, different institutional structures are in place. There is the Board, for instance, which is occupied with administrative affairs and efficient management at the university level. Decisions made at these levels have an impact on the individual departments, such as the philosophy department.



These, in turn, also provide feedback to the board through formal and informal channels. Then there are the secretaries, HR and IT services, who all have a crucial supportive and administrative role at the university. Finally, this whole undertaking requires material components, such as salaries, buildings, books, computers, stationary, coffee machines, et cetera. These structures and facilities are all needed to enable the scientific staff to do the different practices the university houses, such as doing philosophical research and teaching philosophy.

It must be noted though, that MacIntyre has a particular understanding of the concept of institution. He sees it as an integral part of a framework that can only be understood in its entirety, including the elements explained before: practice, internal and external goods, and virtue (MacIntyre, 2007; Moore & Grandy, 2017). It is worth quoting him at length to see how they all hang together.

Institutions are characteristically and necessarily concerned with [...] external goods. They are involved in acquiring money and other material goods; they are structured in terms of power and status, and they distribute money, power and status as rewards. Nor could they do otherwise if they are to sustain not only themselves, but also the practices of which they are the bearers. For no practices can survive for any length of time unsustained by institutions. Indeed so intimate is the

relationship of practices to institutions – and consequently of the goods external to the goods internal to the practices in question – that institutions and practices characteristically form a single causal order in which the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution, in which the cooperative care for common goods of the practice is always vulnerable to the competitiveness of the institution. (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 194)

This quote illustrates that MacIntyre sees institutions essentially as part of a framework that includes practices, internal goods, external goods and virtues. The institution is required to obtain external goods, because these goods are needed to sustain the practices that the institution bears. In the case of Philosophy for instance, funding (an external good) is needed to pay personnel, buy books, laptops and other things, all of which facilitate the practice of philosophy and the realisation of its internal goods. Being good at the practice of philosophy, in turn, typically gives practitioners access to even more external goods, such as prestige, status and, possibly, funding. However, if the institution's competitive acquisitiveness for money, power, status and other external goods becomes too fierce, it can put the cooperative care and virtues needed to realise internal goods into danger. For example, academic philosophy becomes all about publishing and writing grant applications (to obtain external goods), rather than becoming wiser and acquiring greater wisdom (which are internal goods).

Following MacIntyre, this leads us again to the essential role that virtue plays in this. Without truthfulness, justice and courage, practices will not be able to resist the corrupting power of institutions (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 194). On the one hand, institutions have an impact on practices and on whether individuals are encouraged to exercise the virtues. On the other hand, virtuous and vicious character traits of individuals have an influence on the workings of institutions. The integrity of a practice requires that at least some individuals exercise and embody the virtues in their activities. And corrupt institutions are always partially an effect of the vices (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 195).

In the case of Philosophy, institutional mechanisms can foster certain vices and virtues. Incentives for philosophers to publish more papers and books – which are an integral part to the contemporary practice of academic philosophy – can foster virtues of diligence and industriousness. However, they might also turn into a pressure to stay competitive, at the level of the individual researcher but also at the level of the university. Obtaining external goods might then go at the cost of the quality of these products (books and articles) and foster vices such as envy (for those who publish more), arrogance (amongst those who believe they are better philosophers if they publish more), dishonesty and a tendency to fraud. Yet, virtuous individuals within the institution are essential for protecting the integrity of philosophy as they will tend to speak up when the practice's internal goods are in danger.

To summarise,

“without the virtues there could be a recognition only of what I have called external goods and not at all of internal goods in the context of practices. And in any society which recognized only external goods competitiveness would be the dominant and even exclusive feature” (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 196).

In this context, MacIntyre speaks of “the corrupting power of the institution” (2007, p. 194), which involves an inevitable tension: practices are vulnerable to the institution’s competitive acquisitiveness for external goods but are also in need of them for their survival and sustenance. In MacIntyre’s book *After Virtue*, however, the term ‘corruption’ remains underdeveloped. In the following section, therefore, I aim to elaborate on this notion in the context of competition.

## 6. The Corruption Argument

Building on MacIntyre’s work, I propose the following definition of corruption:

**Competition (corruption).** A practice gets corrupted when institutionalised competition for external goods seriously inhibits the realisation of internal goods; or it triggers attitudes and actions that frustrates the realisation of internal goods.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Competition frustrates the realisation of internal goods, not only because there is *fewer time* devoted to it (which I will call ‘opportunity costs’ in chapter 5), but

Corruption comes in degrees: the more the realisation of internal goods gets inhibited, the more morally problematic it is.

As becomes clear from this definition, something important gets lost in the process, when an arrangement used to allocate external goods becomes (increasingly) competitive. I will demonstrate this process – from the point where there is still ample room to realise the practice’s internal goods until the point that the practice gets corrupted – by means of a diachronic analysis. I start out from a non-competitive baseline, then I move to a competitive situation, which in turn becomes more and more competitive, until the realisation of internal goods gets seriously inhibited.

Starting out from my baseline, where internal goods are realised in a cooperative manner<sup>38</sup> and external goods are obtained in non-competitive ways as well. Note that this baseline does not imply a

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(importantly for this chapter on corruption) because it *changes the practice*. I will elaborate on the difference between opportunity costs and corruption in chapters 5, 6 and 7. For now, the crucial difference is that corruption is mostly about philosophy not being philosophy anymore due to a shift in one’s attitudes, while opportunity costs is more about what the competitor misses out on by having to spend its time keeping up with the others in the rat race.

<sup>38</sup> As we have seen with our chess example, competition is sometimes constitutive of a practice and therefore needed to realise a practice’s internal goods. Some competitive challenge is required to help each other become better at chess; competition therefore has collaborative purposes. As I will show below, my Corruption Argument is also applicable to practices where competition is constitutive of the practice.

situation *without* external goods nor rules. Following MacIntyre, external goods are genuine *goods* (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 196), needed to sustain institutions and the practices they bear. However, these external goods could be distributed by means of non-competitive rules. Let us look at Philosophy again:

**Philosophy (baseline).** Individual research grants are allocated in non-competitive ways. This non-competitive allocation procedure can take on different forms, ranging from an equal distribution (e.g. allocating research time equally across employed researchers) to a need-based distribution (e.g. looking at how many resources researchers need to execute their project) and ranging from a full lottery to a partial lottery (e.g. only among those researchers who reach a minimum performance threshold). This research money is then used by the individual philosophers to realise the practice's internal goods, that is, to collaboratively gain wisdom and knowledge and/or get closer to the truth.

Now, let's move from this non-competitive base situation to a competitive situation. This is done by implementing a procedure through which candidates' performances are compared and ranked to determine who is the 'winner' – according to criteria – and can therefore make claims on the external goods in question. Introducing competition for external goods is thereby a way of *regulating* the practice differently; it creates different incentives (one is incentivised to behave

strategically to obtain the external good) and introduces new ways in which practitioners relate to one another (now they're also competitors). The introduction of this competitive allocation procedure also creates new scarce, external goods, such as the desired status of 'winner' and prestige and status that comes with it.

**Philosophy (introduction of competition for external goods).**

The external good of research money – used to pay the salaries for researchers to do their research – is per definition rival: a euro spent by one researcher cannot be spent anymore by another researcher. One way of allocating this external, rival research money, is by means of competitive grant schemes. Applicants are requested to write a research proposal and send in a resume. Then the selection committee compares the applicants' past performances and future potential and determines who is the 'best' or most 'excellent', according to pre-determined criteria (such as publication record). The ones at the top, the winners, receive the grant, while those lower down don't receive grant money. The winners (and the winners *only*) can therefore use the grant to realise internal goods.

How about cases where competition is already *constitutive* of the practice, as is the case for chess? Here, the introduction of competition for external goods, such as prizes and money, can make the practice of chess *more* competitive. Let me illustrate. Chess' rules and procedures are such that, if one wants to checkmate the opponent and win, one

needs to engage in analytical thinking and strategic behaviours, amongst other things. The more one realises chess' internal goods, the more often one will win against increasingly difficult opponents; and winning against increasingly difficult opponents is a sign that one realises chess' internal goods to larger extents. Winning often at chess may lead to the achievement of external goods, such as prestige and prizes. However, whether and how these external goods, such as trophies and money, are located allows for some flexibility. One can decide not to hand out trophies at all, only to the top 3 or the top 1, or give a participation prize to all the players. And while winners of chess might receive esteem and recognition in virtue of being excellent players, awarding them with prizes – which are contingent to chess – gives them extra ways of showing off and receiving more praise. Likewise, the money needed to sustain the practice of chess can be distributed in many (competitive and non-competitive) ways.

Note: at this stage I am not saying anything about corruption yet. My point here is that the introduction of competition for external goods and (therefore) an increase in stakes implies an increase in competitiveness. This is the case, regardless of whether competition was already constitutive of the practice or not. One doesn't only aim to win at chess to realise its internal goods; one is also incentivised to win at chess for its external goods.<sup>39</sup> In the case of Philosophy, an increase in stakes can look as follows:

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<sup>39</sup> Another way in which we can speak of a practice becoming *more competitive* is by introducing more competitors who also perform at more or less the same level (cf.



**Philosophy (increased stakes).** The stakes of the practice of philosophy increase if, say, competitively securing highly selective grants becomes increasingly important for one's career as an academic philosopher. Competition for ever more important grants incentivises academic philosophers to (only) develop the capacities that they will be evaluated on, such as one's publication record. If most colleagues have an  $X$ -number of publications, then it is in your interest to have  $X+1$  to have a leg up in the competition for external goods, such as grants and status, which, in turn, will allow you to keep doing philosophy.

Ideally, the criteria and the rewards in competitions are a proxy for the extent to which participants realise the practice's internal goods. A good publication record is a proxy for being a good researcher/philosopher, which will give you a competitive edge when applying for an academic job. Winning many prizes at chess is a proxy for being a good chess player. Here, external goods don't only foster and sustain the practice; they also have an important signalling function: the grant, the prize, the

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Vickers, 1993, p. 3). We could make chess – including the realisation of its internal goods – more competitive by attracting more competitors in different leagues. And making university education more accessible (to people from different social classes and backgrounds) also means that the job market for university educated people becomes more competitive, which is a good thing. When I speak of 'increasingly competitive' in my research, I refer to a heightening of the stakes and/or the introduction of competition in domains of life that were not competitive before. More on this in the upcoming chapters.

job or the reputation is the result of and therefore a sign of one's true qualities and excellences. So, an increase in stakes, that is, an increase in competitiveness of the arrangements used to distribute external goods, might be justified (i) if that leads to the greater realisation of internal goods and (ii) if external goods continue to have a signalling function. This brings us back to this eternal tension that I mentioned earlier, in section 5: the (competitive) acquisition of external goods is needed to sustain the practice and give practitioners the means to realise internal goods and become more excellent practitioners; external goods (such as prizes) are in turn also an indication of excellence.

However, this focus on competitively acquiring *ever more* external goods (which typically benefits individuals at the expense of others) always risks undermining internal goods (which benefit the community). It is characteristic of competition that it tends to push to the centre of attention those goods that are externally and contingently connected to a practice. According to competition's logic, participants always need to strive for more external goods than others to stay ahead of, or at least, keep up with the rest, with the risk that the realisation of internal goods, including the exercise of the virtues, gets frustrated. In line with MacIntyre (2007, pp. 194-195), I call this phenomenon 'corruption'. To repeat the definition that I gave at the beginning of this section, a practice gets corrupted when the institutionalised competition for external goods triggers attitudes and actions that seriously inhibit the realisation of internal goods.

What makes this account of corruption so attractive, is that it fits with people's daily experiences. What one ought to do to do the practice

well and take care of its shared standards and internal goods is under constant institutional pressure to compete with others and thus to meet demanding targets and deliver measurable outputs in a timely manner, as illustrated by the examples in the remainder of this section.<sup>40</sup> One merely strives for the tokens of excellence, rather than actually becoming excellent. Or, following Rousseau, “[t]o be and to seem bec[o]me two very different things” (Rousseau, 1755/2002, p. 122).

Corruption can be caused by two institutional mechanisms. First, the most obvious one: when the institution literally pits practitioners against each other in (high stake) competitions for external goods, the practice can get corrupted. Usually, the institutions themselves are also competing against one another for scarce, external goods, such as market share or (fixed sum) government funding. Institutions typically implement competitive policies with the aim of driving up the productivity and output, such that the institution can stay competitive on a macro level. Let me illustrate this first mechanism by means of Philosophy:

**Philosophy (corruption 1).** Countries and universities want to stay competitive and do well on national and international rankings. To reach or stay at the top, national funding bodies and

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<sup>40</sup> This point is in also made by Geoff Moore in his paper *On the Implication of the Practice-Institution Distinction: MacIntyre and the Application of Modern Virtue Ethics to Business* (2002, p. 25), though he only focusses on corporations, while I look at institutions more generally.

universities distribute grants competitively with the aim of fostering ‘excellent’ research. Individual researchers are thereby pitted against each other in their quest for funding, which they need to continue doing the practice of philosophy and realise its internal goods. However, the practice gets corrupted when philosophy has nothing to do with its internal goods anymore. One’s attitudes and actions are all directed towards publishing and writing grant proposals that include terms like ‘impact’ and ‘evidence-based’ at the cost of gaining wisdom, knowledge and nuanced perspectives, including the virtues such as truthfulness, humility, prudence and curiosity. We cannot even speak of ‘philosophy’ anymore.

The corruption of practices caused by this first institutional mechanism can go hand in hand with the development of vice. Following Wells and Graafland (2012, p. 329), “competitive success can itself distort prudence in the direction of arrogance or recklessness, particularly in cases where the difference in rewards for ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ is very significant.”

A second institutional mechanism that can cause corruption is when inter-institutional competition for external goods trickles down to the practice. In this case, the practitioners themselves are not pitted against each other, but they still feel the competitive pressures from ‘above’, due to strict targets they need to meet and constant evaluation and control. Clinical psychologist and social critic Paul Verhaeghe (2015, pp. 132-137) observed this phenomenon in health care as well

(even though he didn't literally call it 'corruption'). To stay competitive as a hospital, and obtain funding and quality labels, the hospital needs to demonstrate its excellence by means of reports and outputs. This results in health care workers constantly being monitored and demanded to fill out extensive paperwork, where 'good care' seems to be all about filling out the right forms correctly, rather than helping patients. Paradoxically, this focus on 'excellence' (as a marketing label, an external good related to status and reputation) runs the risk of resulting in *less* excellence (as in, quality care for patients, an internal good). The exclusive focus on measurements, numbers and evaluations (which is, as we have seen in chapter 2, a defining characteristic of competition) goes at the cost of valuable internal goods that are not and often cannot be measured (such as taking some extra time to have a casual chat with patients and relate to them beyond their illness). Again, the workers are not pitted against each other, but they do need to report back and justify themselves constantly to keep the hospital competitive on a macro level, up to the point that care workers cannot realise the internal goods of care work anymore. For the practice of philosophy, we can envision a similar scenario:

**Philosophy (corruption 2).** Inter-institutional competition between universities might impact the practice and the practitioners down the line. Competition for ever more students, for instance, puts extra pressure on academic staff if the number of staff members does not grow along with the increasing student numbers. In this case, the staff is not literally pitted

against each other, but they are expected to deliver high quality education to bigger groups in the same amount of time. One might monitor the quality of this large-scale education, for example, by means of student evaluations, which, when positive enough, can lead to a high position in national student rankings, which will attract more students. Again, philosophy education is corrupted when it becomes all about appearing well in the stats, rather than about really passing on philosophy's internal goods to potential future philosophers, and teaching them about the virtues needed to do philosophy. We're not doing philosophy anymore, but some kind of scoring game.

Until this point, I argued for the claim that institutionalised competition for external goods can lead to corruption; the practice becomes all about scoring and winning rather than collaboratively taking care for the realisation of its internal goods. Now, is there any empirical research that could indeed support my claim that competition inhibits the realisation of internal goods?

## **7. Empirical Studies that Signal Corruption**

The aim of this section is to provide some empirical support for my Corruption Argument. Note, however, that the point of the empirical studies I refer to below is not to unequivocally prove MacIntyre's broader culture critique; there is always a degree of interpretation involved in relating empirical studies to broader societal problems (such

as that of corruption caused by competition). Yet, these studies do make my claim about the corrupting effects of competition more plausible. They can therefore best be regarded as studies that signal the existence of corruption; they give us supporting reasons to believe that the realisation of internal goods is seriously inhibited.

In support of my Corruption Argument, I will draw relevant parallels with the literature on financial incentives, where similar corruption arguments have already been employed extensively.<sup>41</sup> First I explain Sandel's claim that putting a price on certain goods can corrupt that good. I also refer to an empirical study that is representative of the literature on price effects to show that putting a price on something indeed changes people's attitudes, motivations and norms in relation to the practice or activity at hand such that something valuable gets lost (i.e. it leads to corruption). Then I make the point that there is a *structural parallel* between the corrupting effects of financial incentives and the corrupting effects of competition.<sup>42</sup> I also refer to

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<sup>41</sup> When I write 'Corruption Argument' (with capital letters) I refer to the specific argument that I am developing with regards to competition. When I write 'corruption argument(s)' (with small letters) I refer to such arguments more generally or I refer to other versions of this argument, such as the one employed by Sandel.

<sup>42</sup> To keep my structural parallel clean and straightforward, I specifically focus on price effects/financial incentives and stay away from marketisation. There is a literature on how marketisation can cause corruption (see also Anderson, 1990; Satz, 2010; Sandel, 2012; Herzog, 2013; and Bowles, 2016), but given that markets are not only characterised by price mechanisms, but also by competition, it would only blur my argument.

some empirical studies to illustrate (though not unequivocally prove) that competition leads to diminished intrinsic motivation, performances and creativity, which, as I will explain, can be regarded as studies signalling corruption.<sup>43</sup> One important conclusion is that, in its effects, the Corruption Argument seems to have a gendered dimension.

Before developing the structural parallel between my Corruption Argument and Sandel's corruption argument, however, I first need to consider an oft-heard objection that is raised against such arguments in the literature. This objection is analogous to the criticism that Satz raises against Sandel, who both position themselves in the moral limits of markets debate. As my claims about competition corrupting practices is analogous to Sandel's claims about financial incentives corrupting practices, Satz' objection can apply to my claim as well. In short, critics like Satz (2010, pp. 117-118) hold that corruption arguments assume some kind of essentialism: in good Aristotelian spirit, practices and goods have some *inherent* or *essential* value to them that gets corrupted when financial (or competitive) incentives are in place. Satz, in turn, denies that goods and practices have any essential or inherent value – in fact, we may be unable to reach consensus on the best meaning of many goods and practices – so there is nothing to corrupt.

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<sup>43</sup> In chapter 7, I will refer to plenty of empirical studies in support of corruption in the context of Dutch academia. In this current chapter, I refer to some empirical studies, mostly with the aim of making my Corruption Argument more plausible and concrete.



In response to critics such as Satz I argue that My Corruption Argument cannot simply be pushed into this essentialist corner nor do I need to take a stance in this debate to make my Corruption Argument work. I follow Claassen (2012) in saying that there exists a misconception that discussions about corruption are ultimately ontological: what is the nature or essence of a practice (Claassen, 2012, p. 591)? In reality, however, the Corruption Argument does a *moral* appeal on us and invites us to discuss what we value in a practice and which values, norms, attitudes and behaviours we deem appropriate to it – this is something both Sandel and Satz could agree on. The introduction or the intensification of competition for external goods shapes our behaviours (now we are incentivised to engage in strategic interactions and perform *better* than others), it shapes how we see one another (as opponents) and shifts our focus towards obtaining external goods. In such situations, it only makes sense to discuss whether we think something valuable and worth protecting gets lost in the process, which is exactly what my Corruption Argument is after.

Now I put this potential objection to the side and continue by explaining how Michael Sandel employs his corruption argument. According to him, “[t]o corrupt a good or social practice is to degrade it” (Sandel, 2012, p. 34). His corruption argument consists of two elements.

First, it assumes that there are certain reasons why practices and goods are (deemed) valuable and worth protecting. It also assumes that there are given norms, attitudes and behaviours that should govern these goods and social practices. Second, Sandel’s corruption argument

rejects the assumption that one can simply increase or decrease certain behaviours by financially rewarding or sanctioning them. It rejects the standard economic presumption that financial incentives leave the good's value unchanged (Sandel, 2012, pp. 113-114). In response, Sandel argues that putting a price on goods and practices expresses certain values and promotes behaviours and attitudes that push away moral and civic goods we deem worth protecting (Sandel, 2012, p. 9). Put differently, financial incentives can crowd out moral and civic behaviours and attitudes and thereby degrade, or corrupt, the practice or good.<sup>44</sup>

So, to decide whether a monetary incentive should be introduced, we first need to discuss which moral and civic goods prevail and which norms should govern the practice. Second, we need to determine whether monetary incentives would damage these goods and norms (Sandel, 2012, pp. 112-113).

In support of his corruption argument, Sandel refers to many empirical studies, one of which is the now classic 1998 field study conducted by Gneezy and Rustichini at ten day care centres in Haifa, Israel. At these centres, parents regularly arrived late to pick up their children, resulting in the day care workers making over hours. To solve the problem of parental lateness, a fine of ten New Israeli Shekel was

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<sup>44</sup> I formulated both points in such a generic way that communitarians like Sandel and liberals like Satz can both agree on them. The claim that financial incentives (as well as competitive incentives) involve a shift in norms, attitudes and behaviours and risk undermining things that we deem valuable and worth protecting does not seem controversial to me.

imposed at six of these (randomly selected) centres on those arriving late by ten minutes or more. Contrary to what the what is called ‘deterrence hypothesis’ maintains – which is the assumption that a (monetary) penalty will create a reduction of certain behaviour – the parents’ late-coming behaviour actually *increased*. Within the three months after the fine was introduced, the number of late comers in all six day care centres *doubled*. And even in the four weeks after the fine was removed, the number of parents arriving late remained as high as when the fine was still in place. To compare, in the four other day care centres that served as a control group, the number of late comers remained approximately equal. “What this field study teaches us [...] is that the introduction of the fine changes the perception of people regarding the environment in which they operate” (Gneezy & Rustichini, 2000, p. 3). The parents perceived the fine as a price they could simply pay for the service of keeping their kids in the day care centre for a longer while. Hence the paper’s title: ‘A Fine is a Price’.

Note that I use this empirical study about the daycare centre in Haifa for *illustrative purposes*, merely to show that financial incentives can lead to crowding out (not that they always or necessarily do so), which is a first step to investigate whether a parallel claim can be made that competition can lead to crowding out. My point is not that crowding out *always* happens, but simply *that* it happens. In fact, an overview paper by Bowles and Polania-Reyes (2012) of 50 studies on crowding shows that 31% of these studies found crowding *in* effects, where financial incentives enhance pro-social, moral and civic behaviour

and/or one's intrinsic motivation. That said, 69% of these 50 studies found various forms of crowding *out* effects.<sup>45</sup>

Following Sandel, studies like the one by Gneezy and Rustichini (2000) illustrate that the introduction of

money into a nonmarket setting can change people's attitudes and crowd out moral and civic commitments. The corrosive effect of market relations is sometimes strong enough to override the price effect: offering a financial incentive to accept a hazardous [nuclear waste] facility [near your home], [...] collecting charity, or show up on time [at the day care centre] reduced rather than increased people's willingness to do so. (Sandel, 2012, p. 119)

Crucially, the introduction of the fine resulted in a shift of frame. The moral responsibility and sense of duty towards one's own child and the care workers disappeared or moved to the background. Coming late was no longer something to be ashamed of, but something parents could compensate for by paying the fine, which was now conceived of as a

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<sup>45</sup> In a later work, Bowles (2016) adds that crowding out typically occurs when the fines and financial rewards convey the message that self-interested behaviour is expected, that the recipients of these incentives are considered lazy, or that they are not trusted to contribute to the public good. See also Frey and Jegen (2001) for a somewhat older overview study that shows that "*strong empirical evidence* [across the economics and psychology literature] exists for [both] crowding-out and crowding-in" (Frey & Jegen, 2001, p. 606, emphasis theirs).

price. Picking up one's child had turned into a mere economic transaction. The 'practice' (of parenting or picking up one's child?) changed; it was no longer understood and treated from a sense of moral responsibility.

There are some important parallels to be drawn between the corruption argument in the context of financial incentives and my Corruption Argument in the context of competition. Just like economic incentives are not a neutral way of motivating people and don't necessarily keep the practice's value intact, competition, too, is not a neutral way of regulating practices. Our motivations, attitudes and the ways we understand and go about practices can change if we adopt a different frame, and we adopt a different frame when/because goods are distributed differently. Similar to the corruption argument in the case of financial incentives, a shift towards a (more) competitive frame has the potential to crowd out morals and corrupt practices.

To reiterate Claassen's point, corruption – both in the context of monetary incentives and in the context of competition – does not necessarily imply that something is 'done' to the good or the practice itself, but can also imply existing values, norms, motivations, attitudes and behaviours change in ways that something of value is lost. So, if you want to find or do empirical research on the extent to which goods and practices are corrupted, one needs to look at the salient norms, attitudes, behaviours and motivations that plausibly signal corruption. In the case of Philosophy, one can identify the following signal:

**Philosophy (signals of corruption).** Due to corruption, we no longer see philosophy as a practice through which we collaboratively acquire greater wisdom and gain knowledge, but as a rat race for meaningless A-publications, prizes and prestige. Insofar that the realisation of internal goods requires intrinsic motivation and creativity (e.g. to come up with original arguments), a decrease in creativity and motivation might be a sign that the practice is corrupted. Moreover, to the extent that being good at philosophy leads to excellent performances (such as gained insights and more nuanced perspectives), a drop in performances can be an indicator of corruption. Other signals that corruption is taking place will be discussed extensively in the case study in chapter 7, such as: a lack of research integrity, fraud and an unwillingness to share work and collaborate with others just to the benefit of one's own individual success.

There are a couple of empirical studies on the impact of competition on people's intrinsic motivation, performances and creativity. Again, while a decrease in intrinsic motivation, a worsening of performances and a decline in creativity are not full-blown proofs for my MacIntyrean Corruption Argument, they do make my claims about the corrupting effects of competition more plausible: it changes attitudes, motivations and actions of practitioners in such a way that arguably something of value gets lost. An important upshot of the studies cited below is that they point towards some interesting gender differences.

I'm starting off with a somewhat older study on the effects of competition on girls' creativity, conducted in the 80's. Girls in the age of 7 till 11 years old were asked to make a paper collage. Those in the experimental group competed for prizes, while those in the control group thought that prizes would be distributed randomly. While the experimental group scored higher on technical aspects of the performance, the control group was judged significantly more creative by the jury. The control group's collages had more variation than those of the experimental group for example (Amabile, 1982).

A similar study was conducted two decades later, where 6-11-year-old children (girls and boys this time) were asked to make a paper collage. Half of them competed for prizes, while the other half did not. This study has comparable results to the previous one: girls' creativity was undermined by competition. Boys' creativity, however, was enhanced. When children were segregated by gender, the impact of the competition was even more pronounced: boys were even more creative, while girls were even less. Additionally, the researchers found that the children who scored high on 'masculinity' reported higher levels of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation when competing, while children who scored high on 'femininity' had lower levels of intrinsic motivation when competing; intrinsic motivation being correlated with creativity (Conti, Collins & Picariello, 2001).

Finally, Erat and Gneezy (2016) did a study to test whether piece-rate and competitive incentives impact participants' creativity. The participants' creative task consisted of designing rebus puzzles, where 'creativity' was regarded as puzzles being original, innovative

and clever. All 257 participants, including those in the control group, were told that their puzzle would be evaluated by a panel of judges on a scale from 1 till 10. One group received a piece-rate incentive where they got \$2 per point. The group in the competitive condition were told that they would be compared with another participant. The one with the higher score would get \$4 and the one with the lower score would get no money. If the two participants had the same score, they would both get \$2. The control group would be asked to design the puzzles without any piece-rate or competitive incentives. The researchers found that, while piece-rate and competitive incentives led to greater effort amongst the participants relative to no incentives at all, neither incentive improved the participants' creativity compared to baseline. The competitive incentives were even counterproductive for creativity, most notably of the female participants. "The gender difference in the effect of competitive incentives is consistent with past literature showing that women react differently to competitive incentives than men" (Erat & Gneezy, 2016, p. 279).<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> A study by Niederle, Segal and Vesterlund (2013) looked at whether affirmative action can have a corrective impact when qualified individuals fail to even enter competitions (for jobs). The researchers "evaluate the effect of introducing a gender quota in an environment where high-performing women fail to enter competitions they can win" (Niederle, Segal & Vesterlund, 2013, p. 1). They found that more women enter the competition for the job when equal representation was ensured by means of a quota. This result is partially driven by women being more willing to compete against other women and partially by women expecting their chances of winning being higher due to the policy (Niederle, Segal & Vesterlund, 2013).



In short, there is limited psychological research on what competition does to people; how a shift in frame (from a non-competitive to a competitive situation) also involves a shift in one's understanding of and one's attitudes, motivations, behaviours towards a practice. This leads to interesting insights by means of which I can further support and nuance my MacIntyrean Corruption Argument. One of these insights is that the introduction of competition seems to affect the attitudes, motivations and behaviours of women differently than those of men, meaning that one's attitudes towards internal goods might also differ. Unfortunately, I cannot properly address the implications of this insight here; more (empirical) research is needed to study the links between corruption and gender. For further empirical support for my claim that competition tends to corrupt practices, see my case study (chapter 7).

## **8. Conclusion**

In this chapter I gave a partial answer to the main normative question of my dissertation: what, if anything, makes competition morally problematic and how do these moral problems inform our ethical evaluations of specific competitions in concrete domains and practices? In response, I developed my Corruption Argument: competitive institutions are morally problematic because, or better, *when* they corrupt practices. It is part of competition's logic that it pushes to the centre of attention those goods that are externally and contingently connected to a practice. The more important it is to competitively obtain

these external goods, that is, the higher the stakes, the more competitive a practice becomes. A practice gets corrupted when competitively acquiring external goods seriously obstructs the realisation of internal goods. The fewer internal goods can be realised, the more corrupted the practice is. Protecting and fostering internal goods is important, because otherwise we lose what is (deemed) valuable about the practice. Philosophy is not philosophy anymore when the shared care for knowledge, truth and wisdom gets sacrificed in the competitive quest for grants.

Conversations on corruption usually revolve around questioning which values and norms we deem appropriate to practices and which attitudes, motivations and behaviours practitioners should adopt in support of these values and norms. When the introduction or intensification of competition results in a shift of frame amongst the practitioners, such that the practice becomes all about winning rather than realising its internal goods, this will be reflected in the practitioner's attitudes, motivations and behaviours. Competition can undermine people's intrinsic motivation and performances for example, both of which are important for realising internal goods.

The empirical literature suggests, however, that competitive incentives have different effects on women than on men. Women, and their ability to realise internal goods, seem to be much more negatively affected by competition than men. These findings could have important implications for how to make job markets, grant allocation procedures and other potentially competitive areas of life more inclusive, even if it is just to promote the realisation of internal goods by a variety of people.

This is certainly relevant for the practice of philosophy, as I argue in my paper *Competition and its tendency to corrupt philosophy* (Drissen, 2022). Concrete suggestions on how to make philosophy less competitive will be done in chapter 7, in my case study of academic philosophy in the Netherlands.

In the following chapter I will provide additional reasons for why/when competition is morally problematic and complement the Corruption Argument with the Harm Argument. Then, in chapter 6, I will tie the three arguments together into an overall framework meant to inform our ethical evaluations of competitions in concrete domains and practices. Finally, this framework will be applied to my case study in chapter 7.

# Chapter 5: Putting Yourself on the Line

## 1. Introduction

What, if anything, makes competition morally problematic and how do these moral problems inform our ethical evaluations of specific competitions in concrete domains and practices? In the previous chapter I argued that a practice gets corrupted, when the competitive quest for external goods goes at the cost of the realisation of internal goods. I called this ‘the Corruption Argument’. In this chapter I provide an additional argument for why competitive institutions, on MacIntyre’s understanding, are morally problematic. I will call this ‘the Harm Argument’, which consist of three types of harms: (a) psychological and emotional costs, (b) opportunity costs and (c) estrangement.

This chapter thereby expands on Waheed Hussain’s Estrangement Account, which he defends in his paper *Pitting People Against Each Other* (2020). In this paper, Hussain poses a very similar to question I focus on in my dissertation. While he recognises that competition can be morally desirable, there are also limits, he says, but what are these limits, exactly? For him, the problem lies in the fact that competition pits the wills of people against each other by design. This gives people strong reasons to disregard one another and undermines solidarity in a (political) community.

While I largely agree with Hussain’s arguments, I argue that his analysis is incomplete. This chapter therefore offers a broader and more

encompassing argument for what is distinctly morally problematic about competition, captured by ‘the Harm Argument’. However, given that I build on and incorporate Hussain’s arguments about estrangement, it is first important to set the stage and make sure that we depart from a compatible understanding of competition and assume a similar institutional context. I will do this preliminary work in section 2.

Then, in section 3 I introduce my Harm Argument and explain what I mean by ‘harm’, after which I identify three types of harm that are typical of *competitive* arrangements, compared to other allocation mechanisms (such as lotteries): psychological and emotional costs (section 4), opportunity costs (section 5) and estrangement (section 6). These harms, so I will argue, provide a *pro tanto* reason not to distribute goods competitively (section 7) and can be diminished by lowering the competition’s stakes and narrowing its scope (section 8). In section 9, I derive a number of conclusions.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> This chapter started out as a paper, which I am writing together with my co-promotor Dr. Bart Engelen. I reorganised big parts of the argument and reworked sections 1, 2, 6, 8 and 9 of this chapter to make it fit within my dissertation. Sections 3, 4, 5 and 7 are truly a collaborative effort; these sections have been written and rewritten by the both of us. We are still in the process of getting the paper published, but reports from anonymous reviewers from journals who rejected our paper were helpful in improving the claims and arguments presented in this chapter.

## 2. Setting the Stage

As I mentioned in the introduction, I will build on Waheed Hussain's 2020 paper *Pitting People Against Each Other* and integrate his Estrangement Account within my broader Harm Argument. I engage with Hussain's work, because his overall project is very similar to mine. In *Why Should We Care About Competition* (2018) he says: "Most people believe that competitive institutions are morally acceptable, but that there are limits: a friendly competition is one thing; a life or death struggle is another. How should we think about the moral limits on competition?" (Hussain, 2018a, p. 570). The question he asks here overlaps with the question that is central in my dissertation: what, if anything, makes competition morally problematic?

However, before developing my Harm Argument (which will include a part on estrangement) let me first make sure that my starting point in this chapter is aligned with Hussain's. Are our definitions of competition compatible? And do we both assume a similar institutional context of scarcity?

First, in chapter 2, *Defining Competition*, we already saw that Hussain sees it as typical for competitions that "one person's completing the procedure to secure the valuable status for herself [...] interfere[s] with another person's completing a corresponding procedure to secure the valuable status for *herself*" (Hussain, 2020, p. 84, emphasis his). Where Hussain's definition focusses specifically on how competition pits people against each other, my definition of competition also includes the aspects of 'comparing and ranking

performances’ and ‘selecting the one who ends up on top’. My definition is therefore more demanding than Hussain’s because of this meritocratic character.<sup>48</sup> This is not a problem for my overall project however, because Hussain’s point that competition pits the wills of the participants against each other is still included in my definition as well: to obtain the status of winner (and potentially other desirable scarce goods), participants have to outperform each other and behave strategically, where someone can only win at the cost of someone else; their wills are negatively linked.

Moreover, Hussain’s main examples in the paper even overlap with the cases I am most interested in as well: Physics Department, labour markets, college admissions, grant allocation procedures and one running example which he called ‘Physics Department’. In one version of Physics Department, for example, Hussain explicitly talks about selecting the tenure-track assistant professor whose contributions to the field in terms of publications were *more important*. This is in line with how I understand ‘performances’ and ‘comparing’ in my definition, where the performance ‘contribution’ is measured and compared by

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<sup>48</sup> The meritocratic character of my definition of competition does not imply that the ‘winners’ are also superior people (cf. Rousseau’s *amour-propre*) nor does my definition imply that the playing field was level (and thereby fair in any substantial way). It merely means that the rules in place are aimed at selecting the candidate whose performances ended up at the top of the ranking, according to given criteria, which may be called ‘fair’ in a formal sense. I thereby also don’t commit to the belief that our society is a meritocracy, as I argue in *Ashamed of Being Poor: The Merciless Belief in Meritocracy* (in press).

means of the number of publications. So, despite some slight differences between Hussain's and my definition of competition, this does not lead to problems with regards to my overall project, since there is still sufficient overlap.

Second, regarding the institutional context, Hussain is particularly interested in institutions that are “substantially engulfing” (2020, pp. 85-86). Such institutions, according to him, (1) determine the access to important goods that everyone has reasons to want (e.g., an income, education, financial security, social standing and social bases of self-respect) and (2) seriously constrain people's liberty to exit or dissolve the arrangement (Hussain, 2020, p. 85). Turning away from amateur sports and games, where no important or vital goods<sup>49</sup> are at stake and where people can easily opt-in and opt-out of, Hussain focusses on institutions that make up the basic structure of liberal democracies and include rules of ownership, inheritance, exchange, taxation and public services. The rules of such institutions determine access to vital goods and services, such as food, health care and housing.

Hussain's focus on ‘substantially engulfing institutions’ is fully in line with the focus in my research as well, but I use different terms. Instead of ‘substantially engulfing’ I speak of competitions with ‘high stakes’ and a ‘wide scope’. The stakes refer to the importance and the size of the benefits that go to winners (like the salaries and other perks of landing a job) and the costs that are inflicted on the losers (like a lack

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<sup>49</sup> In this chapter, I use the terms ‘vital goods’ and ‘important goods’ interchangeably.



of financial security). The scope refers to how widespread the competition is i.e. how many social practices and (aspects of) societal domains are organised competitively. I will come back to the terms ‘stakes’ and ‘scope’ in section 8. For now, what is important to know is that both, Hussain and I, assume that these vital goods that everyone has reasons to want are rival (Hussain, 2020, p. 84) or scarce (see my second chapter). Lack of access to vital goods can therefore not, in and of itself, capture what is distinctly morally problematic about competition. Hussain and I agree that there are several ways of allocating scarce, vital goods. Competition is one of them, but other options are lotteries, need-based or first-come-first serve systems (Hussain, 2020, pp. 84, 105).

Take a lottery. Both, competitions and lotteries, generate winners and losers but those groups will not overlap. Those who would lose the lottery but win the competition can claim that the latter promotes their interests, while those would win the lottery but lose the competition have their interests set back by the competition. As both competitions and lotteries exclude some participants from vital goods, the former cannot be said to be more morally problematic than the latter, unless more arguments are provided which point towards the distinct moral problems of *competition* (compared to, say, a lottery). Hussain asks in this regard: “Does the fact that a substantially engulfing arrangement is [competitive] count as a moral defect” (2020, p. 87)?

In response, Hussain develops his Estrangement Account. He argues that competitions are morally problematic because/when they create powerful reasons for the participants to disregard one another,

which constitutes a worrisome failure in solidarity amongst members of a (political) community. While I largely agree with Hussain’s argument, I argue that the harms that come with distributing vital goods in a competitive manner are much broader. In what follows, I therefore incorporate Hussain’s Estrangement Account into my more encompassing Harm Argument (section 6), that also includes psychological and emotional costs (section 4) and opportunity costs (section 5). But first, what do I mean by ‘harm’?

### 3. Introducing the Harm Argument

The main claim that I defend in this chapter is that competition incurs *harms* on the participants, captured by what I call ‘the Harm Argument’. My understanding of the term ‘harm’ builds on Joel Feinberg’s influential definition of *harm as a setback to interests* (Feinberg, 1990, p. x).<sup>50</sup> This understanding is fairly conventional in the literature and, as I will show, it suits the purposes of my research project well. But what does it mean to have one’s interests set back?

According to Feinberg, one’s interests “consist of all those things in which one has a stake. [...] [T]he things these interests are *in*, are distinguishable components of a person’s well-being: he flourishes or languishes as they flourish or languish” (Feinberg, 1987, p. 25).

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<sup>50</sup> For reasons of space, I cannot go into the huge literature on what exactly constitutes ‘harm’. Feinberg’s account is sufficient for my purposes. For an overview of different conceptions of harm, *check de Villiers-Botha (2020)*.

Feinberg distinguishes two forms of interests that contribute to a person's well-being. The first are 'ulterior interests', which refer to one's ultimate goals and aspirations in life, such as landing a successful job, raising a family, writing a good novel, building the house of one's dreams or advancing a social cause one cares about. The second are what Feinberg calls 'welfare interests'. These interests are fundamental, as they are shared by nearly everyone, and non-ulterior, as they need to be fulfilled before one can start working towards satisfying one's ulterior interests. Think, for instance, of mental and physical health, bodily integrity, emotional stability, financial security and the capacity to engage in social interactions and maintain friendships (Feinberg, 1987, p. 38).

On Feinberg's account, harm, or a setback to interests, refers to cases where an intervention results in one's interests being promoted to a lesser extent than they would have been, had the intervention not occurred (Feinberg, 1987, p. 35). I think that this can be understood in two different ways. The first is a *temporal* setback, which involves a comparison of one's interests before and after the intervention (such as the implementation of a competition that ends up being won by some and lost by others). In the competition for a job or a grant, harm occurs on this understanding if the applicants' interests are thwarted over time, after the competition has run its course. The second understanding of 'setback' is *counterfactual* and compares the extent to which the interests of relevant parties are promoted in a competition with a counterfactual setting where the competition were not implemented

(such as a lottery, where scarce goods are distributed randomly, on the basis of a draw of luck).

In what follows, I argue that competitively organised substantially engulfing institutions generate harms, on both understandings, as they thwart the interests of at least some participants (over time or in comparison to non-competitive distributional mechanisms). What makes substantially engulfing *competitions* particularly harmful is not simply that the losers are excluded from access to vital goods – this is also the case for lotteries and other allocation mechanisms – but that this exclusion is accompanied with three harms that are proper to competition: substantial psychological and emotional costs (section 4); substantial opportunity costs (section 5); and inspired by Hussain estrangement (section 6). These harms or setback to people’s interests are not inherent to the scarcity and can be avoided by non-competitive arrangements. I elaborate on these harms below, focusing primarily on competitions for jobs, but my analysis equally applies to competitions for other vital goods, such as for university admissions and grants.

#### **4. Psychological and Emotional Costs**

Competitors put themselves on the line, (future) winners and losers alike. While allocation mechanisms generally exclude at least some parties from the scarce goods they distribute, all on different grounds (e.g. luck, merit, first-come-first-serve), competitions confer a negative symbolic status on losing. Competitions – where one’s performances

are compared and evaluated per definition – are prototypical environments for social evaluative threat, “which occurs when a person’s self could be judged negatively by others” (Park, et al., 2023, p. 4). Losing means being evaluated unfavourably compared to the others, so it is in our interest to avoid losing. It is therefore not surprising that participating in competitions has been found to correlate with (social) stress (Salvador 2005) and with anxieties and insecurities about self-worth (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2018, pp. 10-19, 71; Kohn, 1992, pp. 106-113, 120-125). This is the case for losers as well as for winners.

*Losers* of high-stake competitions are typically confronted with negative judgement, or at least, they compare unfavourably to the winners. As psychologist Alfie Kohn notes:

If we feel impelled to prove ourselves by triumphing over others, we will feel humiliated when they triumph over us. To lose – particularly in a public event – can be psychologically detrimental even for the healthiest among us. [...] No one in a culture as competitive as ours [that is, the American culture] is unfamiliar with the experience of being flooded with shame and self-doubt upon losing some sort of contest. (Kohn, 1992, p. 109)

The more we value winning in a given society, Kohn adds, the more we internalise losing as *being* a loser (Kohn, 1992, p. 109). While *all* participants might experience the *fear* of failure (cf. Kohn, 1992, p. 109), if shame is a response to the “devaluation by others” (Cavanagh

& Allen, 2007; Sznycer, et al., 2016), losers, contrary to winners, may actually feel ashamed. This, while there is no shame in losing a lottery, since in a lottery, one doesn't expose oneself to social evaluative threat.

The *winners* or those near the top, however, are not spared. They too, can suffer psychological and emotional costs, especially as they can buckle under the pressure to remain successful. Stress and anxiety may occur *in anticipation* of social evaluation (Craw, Smith & Wetherell, 2021) and having to compete (Kohn, 1992, p. 109). Yet the longer a competition lasts or the more often one has to compete, the more likely it is that competitors have no time to relax. “Winning offers no genuine comfort because there is no competitive activity for which victory is permanent” (Kohn, 1992, p. 111). One could win the competition for a prestigious job, but once at the job, one is incentivised to engage in the competition for a promotion. Once promoted, there will be another goal. Especially the ones at the top have a lot to lose (e.g. their status and respect), meaning that they have to keep performing well over and over again while the standard of what is deemed ‘good enough’ keeps rising (more on opportunity costs, in section 5).

Also, the psychological and emotional costs on “strivers” as Jennifer Morton calls them (2019) – first-generation students from disadvantaged and/or immigrant backgrounds who climbed the socio-economic ladder – can be substantial. Strivers often experience a cultural mismatch between the community they’re from and the middle-class workplaces and schools they moved into. Contrary to the communities where they grew up, these middle-class environments “tend to favor an independent cultural model that prizes assertiveness

and individuality” (Morton, 2019, p. 105). This is in line with an empirical study that reports higher levels of cortisol, more negative emotions and greater feelings of being an impostor among first-generation students when exposed to the “notoriously competitive STEM courses that often pit students against each other” (Canning et al., 2019, p. 647).<sup>51</sup>

One response to the psychological and emotional costs might be to tell the participants to ‘just get over it’. ‘Get yourself together and move on,’ one might say. While such a response is justified in the case of a friendly game of scrabble with friends, I argue that such a response is too harsh in the case of substantially engulfing competitions. Such competitions are not ‘just a game’. Vital goods are at stake, such as financial and job security, the social basis of self-respect, being taken seriously and, in cases where access to health insurance is linked to your job status (cf. Hussain, 2020, pp. 105-106), access to health care. The psychological and emotional costs incurred on the losers and the winners alike can therefore not be reduced to them being overly sensitive. Instead, being excluded from important goods everyone has reasons to want because of (fear for) negative evaluative judgements of

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<sup>51</sup> A small note on the status of the empirical studies I refer to throughout this chapter: none of these studies provide conclusive evidence for claims about the size of the harms that competition causes or the conditions that partly determine that size. Instead, they are meant to show that the harms that I identify in this chapter *can* and in fact *did* and *do* happen when competitions are organised. As such, they are meant to illustrate that the conceptual and normative claims I make about competition have some bearing on our empirical reality and are more than mere theoretical possibility.

one's capacities and worth is likely to generate psychological and emotional harms, both, in the temporal and counterfactual sense.

Recall Feinberg, who says that those things one has an interest *in* contribute to a person's well-being. All participants (future winners and losers) in substantially engulfing competitions not only have an interest in winning the scarce good in question but also in avoiding the psychological and emotional costs that come with losing these crucial competitions. As competitions always come with losers, they inevitably generate setbacks of interests amongst that group on a temporal way; they are not only excluded from the scarce vital goods, they're excluded *because they were deemed not good enough*. Not getting the desired job, for instance, means being excluded not only from its material benefits (financial security) but also from its immaterial benefits (such as recognition and meaningful social relationships, as identified by Gheaus and Herzog (2016)).<sup>52</sup>

What about the counterfactual understanding of harm? Lotteries surely perform better in this respect, as they don't pose any social evaluative threat. Just as winning them doesn't grant any special recognition (the goods distributed may have immaterial benefits but winning a lottery itself does not generate those), losing them doesn't come with stigmatisation, shame or other psychological or emotional

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<sup>52</sup> Especially the literature on the meritocratic myth illuminates how being regarded as a 'loser' in society comes with stigma and serious emotional and psychological costs, such as shame and a sense of inferiority. If competitions provide opportunities for all, it is completely up to participants to grab them. Losing then really is considered one's own fault (see: Littler (2017); Sandel (2020); and Young (1961)).



costs. What sets competitions apart from lotteries is that they distribute goods on the basis of participants' *performances*, which partially depend on their abilities and efforts.<sup>53</sup> Losing a competition implies a negative evaluation of those and thus threatens people's sense of self-worth or self-esteem (Kohn, 1992, chapter 5; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2018, pp. 17-18).<sup>54</sup> In contrast to lotteries, competitions induce people to 'put themselves on the line'. If you lose, you're not just being excluded from some scarce good, but you're excluded because of one's deemed lack of competence. But also those who are relatively successful have to put themselves on the line, with the stress and anxiety that comes with it. As such, the psychological and emotional costs that competitions inevitably impose on participants are *specific to* competitions, where performances are evaluated and thus (self-)esteem is on the line. Are *you* performing well, compared to others, or not?

Given that we put our *selves* on the line, the psychological and emotional costs mentioned in this section do not merely refer to some mental discomfort; competition touches more fundamentally and

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<sup>53</sup> Luck often plays a bigger role in determining the outcome of competitions than is recognised, especially by the winners. Empirical research shows that, due to attribution error, "[w]inners [are] more likely than losers to attribute unequal outcomes to talent instead of luck, to see the outcomes as fair, and to express personal satisfaction" (Molina, Bucca & Macy, 2019, p. 4).

<sup>54</sup> Wilkinson and Pickett (2018) collect some of the empirical evidence which shows that the (relatively) poor in unequal societies, i.e. those who have been losing the competition for status and decent jobs, are more likely to suffer from mental health and other problems, such as depression (p. 40), anxieties (p. 50) and mental distress (pp. 50-51).

existentially upon our sense of self and self-worth, who we perceive ourselves to be and how we want to be perceived and recognised by others. As we have seen in chapter 3, human beings have *amour-propre*, which is the need to count as someone of value, both in the eyes of others and relative to the value of others (Neuhouser, 2008, p. 46). In substantially engulfing competitive arrangements, one's primary source of esteem and recognition comes from (continuously) performing better than others. This is not a healthy way of fostering *amour-propre*, since one's worth becomes conditional upon how one compares to others, this, while other unconditional forms of recognition and esteem are absent. A collective obsession for recognition, esteem and being better than others may therefore be an indication that we lack self-esteem at a more basic and unconditional level.

## **5. Opportunity Costs**

The second type of harm inflicted by substantially engulfing competitions relates to the opportunity costs they impose on participants. Opportunity costs can be understood as the benefit one misses out on by having chosen one alternative over the other. Competitors are incentivised to invest time, effort and other resources to do whatever is needed to win. This is time that could have been spent on other things one deems important as well, such as spending time with friends and family, time to engage in that new hobby or reading a novel. Or, as we have seen in the case of Philosophy in the previous chapter, practitioners could have spent that valuable time on the realisation of

internal goods rather than engaging in the rat race for publications and other outputs. In my case study of Dutch academia (chapter 7) I consider empirical evidence on the time that researchers spend applying for competitive grants with low acceptance rates. For now, it is merely important to explain what I mean by opportunity costs and how it constitutes a harm.

On a temporal understanding of harm, all competitors typically invest large amounts of time, effort and resources in preparing for the competition. While this pays off for winners, losers get no (immediate) return on their investments, which means that the competition leaves them worse off than they were before. Not only do they continue to be excluded from the scarce, vital good at stake, the resources that they spent on improving their chances of winning could have been spent on other valuable things as well. Of course, the things the losers gained and learned in the process of competing must be included in the equation, but it is equally clear that the sacrifices one made to improve one's chances of winning, first of all, didn't pay off, and second, can never be recuperated. Depending on one's aspirations in life, one's ulterior interests are setback. If your goal was to land that successful job, then you didn't succeed, despite having put the resources into it. If your goal was to, say, raise a family or write a novel, but you spent that time improving your competitive edge on the job market, then you lost out on that valuable time as well.

Competitions also harm losers on a counterfactual understanding. Take a lottery. Except for buying a ticket, lotteries don't require any investments to improve one's chances (or to be

‘competitive’, i.e. stand a chance at winning) and do not incentivise participants to put in time and effort, as pure luck determines who wins. As such, lotteries do not impose the opportunity costs that characterise competitions. Or consider a need-based system. Thinking of needs in terms of performances and ‘who is best at needing’ does not make sense. Also here, participants are not incentivised to invest resources in outperforming others in any way and therefore don’t incur opportunity costs.

Also here, the winners are not spared; they incur opportunity costs as well. These costs become particularly salient when we consider the literature on positional competition. Take job competition again. In the rat or arms race for competitive advantage, one needs to invest an increasing amount of time, effort and money in courses and trainings to keep up with others. Whereas before, a bachelor’s degree in a relevant field might have been enough to land the desired job, now, one needs to have a master’s degree, which costs time and money. Everyone individually has an interest in advancing, but if every participant puts an increasing amount of time, effort and money into improving their position, one’s relative position will not change. Of course, education is a positional as well as a non-positional good, meaning that apart from the competitive advantage it confers (the positional part), it also generates better-informed and critical citizens (the non-positional part; see also Brighthouse & Swift, 2006; Harel Ben Shahr, 2018).<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> See also my paper on positional competition: *A Losing Game: Clarifying and Informing Debates on Positional Competitions* (2023).

However, one of the important insights of the literature on positional competition is that it leads to (social) waste (Frank, 2005; 2011). As Fred Hirsch put it, “[i]f everyone stands on tiptoe, no one sees better” (1999, p. 5) but everyone would cramp up quickly. Even those who are considered ‘winners’ now have to keep doing more trainings and courses just to keep their position, otherwise, others will pass them. These costs are substantial and can therefore plausibly be called ‘harms’. There are ample of actual examples where opportunity costs occur in the context of rat races. Think of the competitive consumption of houses, cars, jewellery, fashion (Frank, 2011) or even weddings (Halliday, 2021). Or consider the perceived decrease in value of educational credentials on the labour market (Tomlinson, 2008), and the well-known phenomenon where employees stay longer in the office, because they don’t want to be the first one to leave and miss out on potential benefits like promotions or raises (Jauch, 2020). In chapter 7, I will develop one specific case in more detail and provide further empirical evidence for the opportunity costs of competition, when I zoom in on competitive academic grants and how they incentivise researchers to collectively spend (or waste) time on grant applications.

On a temporal understanding, more and more of an individual’s life is consumed by keeping up with the rat race, while one’s relative position on the competitive hierarchy remains the same. One spends more money on weddings than half a century ago just to have a wedding that is considered ‘normal’ or ‘standard’. One needs to have an increasing number of credentials to make a chance on the job market. One makes increasingly longer hours at work to avoid missing out on

potential benefits or simply to avoid being dismissed. And one spends more and more time applying for grants trying to stand out compared to peers. This is also the case for those who are considered ‘winners’ (who are only winners *for now...*). This is time, effort and money that is not spent on valuable things that don’t give one a competitive edge, such as spending time with friends or going for a forest walk. But also at the level of practices (like Philosophy), the time spent on the competitive strive for social advancement could instead have been spent on realising internal goods. So, in the case of Philosophy, we lose out on valuable insights and knowledge as well. On a counterfactual understanding, other distribution and selection mechanisms would not incite such wasteful rat races. Even if we would opt for another performance-based, but non-competitive system, we could avoid much of the social waste. Think of a system with a demanding performance threshold in place, but the scarce good is randomly allocated among those who meet the threshold. In that case, participants are incentivised to do well, but this won’t spiral in an eternal and wasteful quest for superior performances.

## **6. Estrangement**

The final type of harm that is part of my Harm Argument is estrangement, which largely builds on Waheed Hussain’s Estrangement Account from his paper *Pitting People Against Each Other* (2020). In this section I first reconstruct Hussain’s Estrangement Account for why/when competition is morally problematic, after which I will fit it into my broader Harm Argument.

Hussain starts his paper off by stating that institutions not only mistreat people when they infringe their rights and freedoms and treat them unfairly; institutions also mistreat people when they pit them against each other. So, apart from the fundamental principles of liberty and equality (or fairness), Hussain defends another principle that should govern the demands of political morality: the principle of community (Hussain, 2020, pp. 79-80). As such, substantially engulfing institutions that provide access to vital goods in a competitive manner can be “morally defective” (2020, p. 87) because/when it estranges people from each other, which leads to a worrisome failure in solidarity amongst members of a (political) community.

Take a Physics Department, he says, which he uses as a model for thinking about competition in a liberal democracy. Imagine the department has two tenure-track assistant professors, *A* and *B*. In tenure scheme 1 (“S1”), *A* will get tenure if she contributes significantly to her respective subfield, no matter what happens to *B*. Likewise, *B* will get tenure if she contributes significantly to her respective field, no matter what happens to *A*. So, there are two separate ‘lines’ or ‘pathways’ in place to get tenure. Imagine that both have a 50% chance of getting it, given the state of their field and their talents (Hussain, 2020, p. 87).

In tenure scheme 2 (“S2”), either *A* or *B* gets tenure, depending on whose contribution to the field is *more important*. So here, there is only one ‘line’ in place; if *A* gets it, *B* will not, and vice versa. Both have a 50% chance of becoming tenured (Hussain, 2020, p. 87).

Hussain argues that there is something distinctly morally problematic about S2 (Hussain, 2020, p. 87), because *A* and *B*’s fates

are negatively linked. To realise their aspirations under S2, *A* needs to formulate and carry out a plan that will impede *B* from doing the same thing, and the same counts for *B* with respect to *A*. With every paper that *A* publishes, *B* is closer to failure, so the efforts that *A* undertakes are “steadily running *B*’s dreams into the ground” (Hussain, 2020, p. 88). Given that such competitive arrangements pit *A* and *B* against each other by design, they both have powerful reasons to think and act with disregard for one another. Moreover, in virtue of the fact that tenure track schemes are not ‘just a game’ but substantially engulfing arrangements, the competitive character of S2 is morally defective (Hussain, 2020, p. 88).

The foregoing insight that competitions create powerful reasons to disregard each other is further developed in Hussain’s Estrangement Account (Hussain, 2020, pp. 94-98). People are estranged, according to him, if they no longer give “each other’s successes and failures [...] the appropriate role in their practical reasoning” (Hussain, 2020, p. 96).

In his view, we are all part of a nonvoluntary solidaristic association where we share a relational ideal of care for each other. This relational ideal goes beyond our personal projects and includes the abstract project of securing what Rawls calls ‘Primary Social Goods’ (PSGs). As a member of the community, I must be concerned not only with my own failures and successes in securing the goods that I need to form and pursue my own conception of the good, but also with the



failures and successes of my fellow members in this respect.<sup>56</sup> According to Hussain's Estrangement Account, this is exactly where conventional liberal egalitarian approaches, which revolve around liberty and fairness, fall short. Societal institutions "are morally defective not only when they violate liberty or equality (or fairness) but also when they create serious reasons for estrangement among citizens with respect to the common good" (2020, p. 101).<sup>57</sup> What then is being violated here, is not liberty or equality, but community, this relational ideal of care for goods everyone has reasons to want. Obtaining PSGs, such as liberties, opportunities and social bases of self-respect, is in everybody's interest and requires obtaining concrete goods, such as jobs and educational degrees. Hussain's objection that substantially engulfing competitive institutions create reasons for estrangement then boils down to a worry about competitions undermining the kind of civic

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<sup>56</sup> In an earlier paper, Hussain explicitly objects to Rawls's idea of *social union* as a form of social connectedness. He instead argues for *mutual affirmation*, where the social relationships between members of a political community have some features in common with friendship. "*A* 'stands with' a person *B* when *A* is oriented to form attitudes towards *B*'s succeeding or failing in some subset of *B*'s projects as if, in some attenuated sense, *A* were succeeding or failing in a subset of *A*'s projects'" (Hussain, 2018a, 571-573).

<sup>57</sup> Also see Hussain, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on the common good (2018b). The 'common good' typically refers to a class of abstract goods that serve the common interests of a political community (such as bodily security). Within the liberal conception that Hussain defends in his paper, the common good consists of PSGs (Hussain, 2020, p. 99).

solidarity needed to create and maintain facilities for members of a political community to secure these goods (Hussain, 2020).<sup>58</sup>

So, what is distinctively puzzling or problematic about competition on Hussain's account is that it pits the wills of the competitors against each other *by design*, regardless of whether this materialises. Whether the two tenure-track assistant professors, *A* and *B*, are friends and stay friends under the competitive condition doesn't make S2 any less morally problematic, according to Hussain. The fact that *A* and *B* remain friends still doesn't give the department the permission to pit them against each other (2020, pp. 89-90).

I fully agree with Hussain in this regard; regardless of whether *A* and *B* stay friends, it is morally problematic to pit them against each other and thereby give them strong *reasons* to disregard one another. However, to make his Estrangement Account fit with my Harm Argument, where I understand 'harms' as setbacks to interests, it is surely worse, morally speaking, if our (welfare) interests are *actually* set back. That is, it is surely worse if our welfare interests for having the capacity to build social relationships, maintain friendships and sustain a (political) community is *actually* set back due to competition.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Note, however, that some estrangement can exist without seriously obstructing the form of solidarity that is required among the members of an association (Hussain, 2020, pp. 94-98).

<sup>59</sup> In chapter 7, where I do my case study of Dutch academia, I will operationalise Hussain's Estrangement Account and look for examples where academics are *actually* estranged from one another.

Estrangement therefore constitutes harms in both the temporal and counterfactual sense.

Estrangement constitutes a harm in the temporal sense, because, due to the competitive arrangement, people are actively encouraged to disregard one another. Whereas *before* the competition took place, there were also scarce vital goods that everyone had reasons to want, but this could go hand in hand with a relational ideal of care for each other. My concern for my own failures and successes is compatible with my concern for other people's failures and successes. This doesn't mean that there can be no envy or disregard in non-competitive situations – we're all human after all – but what is particular about competition is that it pits one's wills against each other *by design*. One person's advancement towards obtaining that vital good necessarily hampers the other person in their attempt to obtain that good. While before the competition took place, people were not incentivised to behave strategically and disregard or resent one another, during and after the competition, they are actively put in a position where disregarding one another leads to one's own competitive advantage. This results in a setback of interests; one's (welfare) interests for meaningful connections and community are thwarted.

Let's consider work and the job market again. Given that we spend a large part of our life at work, it is an important place where people can engage in social and cooperative interactions. As such, work provides crucial access to the good of community (Gheaus & Herzog, 2016). It is therefore in the interest of colleagues to *not* be pitted against each other. To illustrate, an anthropological study among workers in the

U.S. construction industry observes that, due to the temporary nature of their job and the increased competition that comes with this, the workforce becomes fragmented and each worker struggles to find the next job. One respondent of the study said: “the competition is high and [there’s] a lot of back-stabbing with the other workers” (Duke, Bergmann & Ames, 2010, pp. 88-89). According to the researchers, this leads to a lack of solidarity and a collective sense of identity, both of which are needed to promote the workers’ shared interests in decent working conditions (Duke, Bergmann & Ames, 2010).

In the counterfactual understanding of harm, one wouldn’t have strong reasons to disregard one another if another distribution mechanism were chosen. However, the comparison with other distribution mechanisms is not so straightforward here. Imagine that jobs were not distributed on a competitive basis, but randomly or based on your parents’ network. Surely, this anti-competitive procedure will be perceived as unfair and thus lead to resentment, which fits Hussain’s notion of estrangement, as it inhibits people from sharing in each other’s failures and successes (in obtaining the job). When (perceived) fairness requires that we provide benefits to the most deserving of all candidates, refusing to install a competition can actually give reasons for estrangement and cause resentment, upheaval, antagonism, jealousy and divisiveness.<sup>60</sup> However – and this is, again, crucial about Hussain’s

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<sup>60</sup> Empirical evidence that most people believe that the best-qualified applications should be hired for a job or admitted to a university can be found in Thomas Mulligan’s book *Justice and the Meritocratic State* (2018, pp. 110-111).

contribution to the literature – what is characteristic of competition is that it pits people against each other *by design*. That other things might also lead people to disregard one another for various reasons is very well possible, but the fact that competition actively fosters an environment where people have to outperform each other and act strategically to get the vital good in question is what constitutes competition’s distinct harm.

### **7. *Pro Tanto* Reasons Not to Distribute Goods Competitively**

In this section, I tie the three types of harm imposed by substantially engulfing competitions together (see table 5.1) and argue that, because these harms are typical for competition, we have strong *pro tanto* reasons not to distribute goods competitively. For simplicity’s sake I compare competition to lottery in Table 1 to illustrate the counterfactual harm. While lotteries also exclude some participants from vital scarce goods, what is distinctive about substantially engulfing competition is that it (1) incurs serious psychological and emotional costs, (2) opportunity costs, and (3) creates serious reasons for estrangement among the participants.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> This is not to say that competitions are always worse than, say, lotteries. Instead, the purpose of this comparison is to show that there are harms involved that are *typical* to competitions in comparison to other distributional mechanisms.

**Table 1***Harms that Competition Brings About*

Conceptions of harm Types of setbacks	Temporal (comparing before and after competition)	Counterfactual (comparing competitions to lotteries)
0. Exclusion from vital goods	Harming some but benefiting others	Harming some but benefiting others
1. Psychological and emotional costs	X	X
2. Opportunity costs	X	X
3. Estrangement	X	X

What are the implications of my Harm Argument? Well, given that substantially engulfing competitions plausibly impose harms on its participants, I argue that there are *pro tanto* reasons not to distribute vital goods competitively. The same claim could be made for the Corruption Argument: given that competitions tend to corrupt practices, we have *pro tanto* reasons not to organise them.

Simply put, *pro tanto* means ‘to that extent’. “If a reason favours my doing something, then I have a “*pro-tanto*” reason to do it: it is *pro tanto* (i.e. to that extent) right for me to do it” (Alvarez, 2017). Likewise, there might be reasons against my doing it, that is, there are *pro tanto* reasons not to do something. For instance, a joke being funny provides a *pro tanto* reason to tell the joke to others. But when this joke is also insulting, then this might be a reason not to tell it. So, there is a *pro tanto* reason in favour and another *pro tanto* reason against telling

the joke. Whether we have a sufficient reason to tell this joke all things considered depends on which *pro tanto* reason is stronger. The stronger of the two *pro tanto* reasons can override or defeat the weaker one. In other words, *pro tanto* reasons can be overridden or defeated by other *pro tanto* reasons (Alvarez, 2017).

When it comes to substantially engulfing competitions, the harms that I identified in this chapter – psychological and emotional costs, opportunity costs and estrangement – are typical for competitive arrangements and give us *pro tanto* reasons not to organise such arrangements. Likewise, given that competition tends to corrupt practices, we have *pro tanto* reasons not to organise them. Adding ‘*pro tanto*’ to my reasons against competition emphasises that they are self-standing reasons that carry moral weight but that they don’t provide an overall judgement. Whether a given competition is morally desirable, overall speaking, is therefore not an all or nothing matter, nor will it depend on some aggregation of pluses (advantages) and minuses (disadvantages), e.g. understood in terms of utility or pleasure. Instead, given that there is a *pro tanto* reason to avoid substantially engulfing competitions due to the harms they inflict, the question is which justificatory reasons are strong enough to allow for these under specific circumstances. We may, for example, have reasons to organise the labour market competitively that may (or may not) be stronger than our reasons for avoiding the harms predictably inflicted on its losers.

One might worry, however, that proponents of competitive arrangements will say that the reasons against can be easily outweighed by the benefits of allocating scarce and vital goods to people who are

best positioned to make socially valuable use of those goods—at least in the domains that we’re most interested in, like educational and employment opportunities. Christoph Lütge for example, author of the book *The Ethics of Competition: How a Competitive Society is Good for All* (2019), recognises that competition unavoidably produces *prima facie* ‘losers’. Yet, he adds that it would be unhealthy for the system as a whole if there were no room for “creative destruction,” in Schumpeter’s words. Just like companies that need to be able to go bankrupt (Lütge, 2019, p. 25), those who cannot find or lose a job are disadvantaged for a little while, until they find another job. These disadvantages are largely compensated for by a sufficiently competitive industry where one has lots of possibilities to win the next competition. According to Lütge, we live in a win-win-win-win-win-lose society (Lütge, 2019, p. 66). When properly organised by rules, competitions lead to exorbitant results we all benefit from (Lütge, 2019, p. 28). So, Lütge argues, the justifications for organising the competition almost always override the *pro tanto* harms.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> There is some additional empirical support for Lütge’s argument that a sufficiently competitive labour market leads to substantial benefits. A study by Graafland and Verbruggen (2022) finds that labour market regulations associated with the welfare state and the social safety net – including hiring and firing regulations, hours regulations and mandated costs of worker dismissal – have a “significant negative effect on human development” (Graafland & Verbruggen, 2022, p. 1125). However, another empirical study by Benach et al. (2014) paints a less rosy picture of labour markets that are increasingly flexible – so with a smaller social safety net. The study suggests that “[w]orkers under situations of precarious employment may face greater demands or have lower control over the work process” which has been associated with



In response to Lütge, I would admit that in some domains, for some goods, it may indeed work like that; the *pro tanto* reasons against competition are easily overridden by the benefits. However, the reason why substantially engulfing competitions may lead to beneficial results is mostly because they are complemented by non-competitive mechanisms that mitigate the harms. Let's look at the job market again. Losing one's job or failing to win competitions for jobs is harmful in the three senses explained before – it leads to psychological, emotional and opportunity costs and estranges people – which might turn into a vicious circle where it becomes increasingly difficult to win competitions for decent jobs in the future. However, because there is a safety net in place in many European countries, these harms are mitigated. The government support (financial and otherwise) is aimed at preventing people from falling so deep that they can never get back up again. The fact those who cannot find or lose a job are only

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“higher levels of stress, higher levels of dissatisfaction, and more adverse health outcomes as compared with workers in more secure work environments” (Benach et al., 2014, p. 245). For the purpose of answering my research question, I do not need to find conclusive evidence for whether (highly) competitive labour markets have a positive *or* a negative effect on wellbeing. As mentioned before, my aim is not to provide an all-things-considered evaluation of competition – for example, in the labour market – but to identify and analyse the moral problems that come with it. In this respect, it is sufficient for me to show that there are substantial harms that plausibly occur due to (increased) competition (due to increasingly flexible and precarious work, for example), without having to weigh those off against purported benefits of this.

disadvantaged for a little while, until they find another job, is mostly because these non-competitive mechanisms are in place.

In the following section, I build on this point of mitigating and eliminating the harms of competition and provide a gradual and nuanced framework that gives us insights into the moral objections against very specific competitions in concrete domains and practices.

## **8. The Stakes and Scope of Competition**

Now that I have discussed the main arguments for why competition can plausibly be considered morally problematic – psychological and emotional costs, opportunity costs, estrangement, and, in the previous chapter, corruption – I am now going to explore which factors determine the weight of those arguments. That is, what makes specific competitive arrangements more or less problematic (i.e. more or less harmful to the practitioners). I go into two of such aspects of competition, namely its stakes and its scope. My claim is that arrangements are *more competitive* for the people who participate in it (1) the higher their stakes are and (2) the wider their scope is. The higher the stakes and the wider the scope, the *more morally problematic* the competition is, that is, the more likely it is that the beforementioned harms will occur.

Note that stakes and scope are *objective* and *scalar* or *gradual* aspects of competition. With regards to its objective aspect, when competitions have high stakes and a larger scope (for example because refraining from them will leave one destitute and without other options),

opting out will *actually* be more difficult. (Just compare a labour market without a social safety net to an amateur tennis match.) As stakes and scope grow and competitions become more engulfing – denoting its scalar aspect – we need *stronger* justificatory reasons to override the *pro tanto* reasons not to organise such competitions. In some cases, competition can be justified only when we lower the stakes. In other cases, vital goods should not be distributed competitively at all. Let me explain what I mean by stakes and scope.

First, a competition's *stakes* depend on the value and the size of the goods and benefits that go to winners (like the salaries and other perks of landing a job) and of the costs that are inflicted on losers (like the lack of financial security and the loss of self-esteem). In substantially engulfing competitions – such as the labour market – participants compete for goods that everyone in a society has reasons to want. As such, the stakes are high by definition. The higher these stakes, the graver the moral worries raised by the competition. A labour market with plenty of options to land a decent job is less worrisome than a tight labour market where only a few jobs are available and where access to other vital goods depends on your employment status.<sup>63</sup> As such, the

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<sup>63</sup> I understand 'more competitive' as an increase in stakes. Note, however, that an economic definition of 'more competitive' refers to an increase in the number of competitors. In this particular example, where there are only a couple of jobs available compared to the number of job seekers, such that the employer has the power to determine the salaries and employment conditions, refers to a *lack of competition* in the economic sense. However, in my understanding, which is also in line with the common usage of the term, this would be an increase of competitiveness. Vital goods,

reasons needed to justify high-stakes competitions should be stronger than those needed to justify low-stakes competitions with only minor gains and losses.

The point about stakes responds to the worry that there should be limits on the risks the participants of competitions are exposed to (even if they consent to participating under high risks). It also responds to the worry that the necessary inequalities that competitions bring about should never be perpetuated to such an extent that ‘winners’ keep winning and ‘losers’ will never be able to catch up again (Jacobs, 2010, pp. 256-257).

When vital goods such as financial security are distributed on a competitive labour market without any safety net, the resulting harms are substantial because the stakes are high. As argued in section 4, 5 and 6, these harms involve not simply the lack of access to these vital goods, but this lack is accompanied with (1) the psychological and emotional costs involved in putting oneself on the line, (2) the opportunity costs of having to compete, and (3) the estrangement that occurs when one person trying to obtain the vital good necessarily interferes with another person’s trying to obtain that vital good. The higher the stakes, the bigger each of these harms likely are.

The second aspect needed to assess how competitive arrangements are, is their *scope*. The more widespread competition is – i.e. the more practices are organised competitively and the more goods

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such as job security, are at stake and only the few winners have access to this, at the cost of everyone else.

are distributed competitively – the bigger its moral worries and the stronger the *pro tanto* reason against it. Competition's scope can be understood in two ways.

First, a specific competition has a larger scope when those who win (or lose) it, gain (or lose) access to *more* goods. Take a world where one's performance in a competitive labour market not only determines one's income but also one's status, health and social, educational and political opportunities. In this world, job success makes one not only rich but also attractive as a friend, partner or presidential candidate. In this sense, scope is clearly related to stakes: the more goods are subsumed under this one competition, the higher its stakes and, correspondingly, the stronger the justification required for organising it.<sup>64</sup> This kind of scope can be reduced by breaking up a competition and organising *multiple* competitions – each with a now smaller scope and with its own criteria for success – to avoid success (or failure) in one of them from spilling over to other competitions.<sup>65</sup> For instance, one can have a labour market that consists of a multitude of small-scale competitions for decent jobs, all with their own criteria for success, but

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<sup>64</sup> In theory, a large scope can also apply to lotteries. Winning a lottery in one aspect of life can give you access to goods in other aspects of life. This is problematic in similar ways that a wide scope of one competition is problematic, except that in the case of competition, one's exclusion from vital goods in all these different spheres of life is accompanied with the harms mentioned earlier.

<sup>65</sup> The point about multiple competitions is inspired by Walzer's *Spheres of Justice* (1983), according to which society should avoid the tyranny of one societal sphere over other spheres.

without any of these jobs giving access to excessive amounts of status, prestige and income.

There is, however, a second sense in which competition can have a large scope. Take a world in which basically everything is distributed on the basis of a multitude and a wide range of competitions, all with their own criteria of success.<sup>66</sup> One could argue, for example, that even love and affection are distributed (more) competitively nowadays due to the arrival of (often online) dating markets. Even if that specific competition has its own, independent criteria for success (and hence is not subsumed under competition for, say, fancy jobs), one can claim that competition, more generally speaking, has become more encompassing and has thus increased in scope, compared to a world (or time) where people do not select partners on the basis of their (perceived) ‘performances’ as a (potential) partner. On the bright side, a world with 101 competitions encourages “people to value a mix of roles and goods that are not as competitive or positional” (Fishkin, 2016, p. 185). Everyone can be a ‘winner’ in some competition, and derive self-esteem from that, without getting a disproportionate advantage in other competitions. On the flipside, however, a life that consists of many different (albeit low stake) competitions, might still be morally problematic, because there are few(er) spaces left where

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<sup>66</sup> While Hussain proposes to keep certain concrete goods out of this competitive sphere, my terminology broadens available institutional design strategies. Instead of keeping goods ‘in’ or ‘out of the sphere of competition’, I stress that there are many (more or less) competitive practices and institutions that are more or less encompassing.

people can be free from social evaluative threats, where one doesn't need to waste resources just to keep up with others and where one can engage in common projects without interfering with other people wish to engage in similar projects.

In line with Hussain's suggestion to keep competition within "the limits of an appropriately "friendly" or "civic" competition" (2020, p. 102), my Harm Argument would look for ways to reduce its harms by lowering the stakes and narrowing the scope. First, one can distribute some vital goods – such as medical care or education – non-competitively, i.e. unconditionally or need-based. Doing away with competitive arrangements is an obvious way of reducing their stakes (to zero). Second, one can hold on to competitions but lower their stakes by reducing the benefits for winners and/or mitigating the costs for losers. When it comes to health care, Hussain proposes to lower the stakes by installing a "ceiling" – an upper limit to the quality of health care services – and a "floor" – a minimum level of unconditional health care available to everybody (Hussain, 2020, p. 106). In the context of positional competition, Fred Hirsch argues that we must reduce the stakes of inter-personal competitions, competitions which, from the social point of view, are partially futile. This could be done, for example, by lowering the financial rewards for top positions, as well as by increasing the range of goods that are collectively provided and so become independent of someone's relative income (Hirsch, 1999; Matthews, 1977, p. 577). When we consider my example of the labour market again, one can implement progressive income taxes (much like implementing a ceiling) and substantial unemployment benefits (like

implementing a floor). Especially the latter matters, morally speaking: the more generous the safety net, the smaller the harms a competitive labour market inevitably incurs on its losers. After all, stakes will be lower if job seekers know they can live decent lives while they're still looking for a job they fancy.

Both upper and lower constraints ensure that any participant's (lack of) success on the competitive labour market does not have all too serious implications on their health and opportunities, both of which are important goods we have reasons to want. So, I endorse Hussain's strategy of lowering the competition's stakes, not only because it would reduce (reasons for) estrangement, but also because it would reduce the psychological, emotional and opportunity costs predictably incurred.

## **9. Conclusion**

Since a lot of today's vital goods are distributed competitively, it is crucial to think carefully and systematically about what characterises competition and what, if anything, makes it morally (un)problematic. In addition to worries about competition corrupting practices, Waheed Hussain convincingly argued that what is so puzzling and problematic about competition is that it pits the wills of people against each other. According to him, competition gives people strong reasons to disregard one another and can lead to a worrisome failure in solidarity amongst members of a (political) community (Hussain, 2020; see also Hussain 2018).



While I agree with Hussain's points, I argued that what is distinctly morally problematic about competition is much broader than just estrangement. I therefore incorporated Hussain's Estrangement Account into my more encompassing and complete Harm Argument. So, in addition to competition harming our interests for community and care for the common good by pitting us against each other, I identified two additional harms: psychological and emotional costs and opportunity costs.

What characterises competition is that access to the goods at stake is determined on the basis of relative performances, which means that competitors have an incentive to invest time and resources in trying to outcompete each other. In addition, they are forced to put themselves on the line: if you win, you are recognised as being 'the best' (or at least 'having performed better than the rest') but if you fail, you are branded 'a loser' (or at least 'not good enough'). When competitions are substantially engulfing, they therefore generate high opportunity costs for all participants and inflict substantial emotional and psychological costs, on losers and winners alike. Those harms as well as the corrupting tendencies of competition constitute *pro tanto* reasons not to distribute those scarce goods competitively that are crucial in leading a decent life. As such, substantially engulfing competitions are only permissible if there are strong justificatory reasons that outweigh these *pro tanto* reasons against them.

The conclusion that we have *pro tanto* reasons not to distribute vital goods competitively has institutional implications. To facilitate a nuanced, gradual and objective approach in which both competitions

themselves and the moral problems they raise come in degrees, I identified two aspects of competition: stakes and scope. Any given competition's stakes and scope correlate with the size of the harms it imposes on its losers and thus with the strength of the justificatory reasons needed for organising it. In some cases, some degree of competition is justifiable (such as on the job market), but institutions are required to lower the stakes and narrow the scope (for example, by providing a strong social safety net and making sure that success in one domain doesn't simply spill over to advantages in other domains). In other cases, no degree of competition is justified due to the nature of the good (for example, access to basic health care should not depend on one's relative performances but should be based on need).

The main research question of my dissertation is: what, if anything, makes competition morally problematic and how do these moral problems inform our ethical evaluations of specific competitions in concrete domains and practices? In response to this question, I developed the Corruption Argument (in chapter 4) and the Harm Argument (in this current chapter 5). Now I move to the applied part of my research project. In the following chapter, I will tie the two arguments together and incorporate them in a framework that can be used to assess the desirability of competition in specific domains and practices. Finally, in chapter 7, I will test this framework and apply it to the domain of Dutch academia and competitive arrangements within the practice of academic philosophy and scientific practices more generally.

# Chapter 6: Normatively Evaluating Competitions

## 1. Introduction

In this chapter I tie my definition of competition (chapter 2), the Corruption Argument (chapter 4) and the Harm Argument (chapter 5) together into one framework. Given my focus on competition's *moral problems* in these chapters, and not its advantages, this framework will be partial in the sense that it does not enable an *overall* ethical assessment of concrete competitions in specific social domains and practices. Instead, it should be understood and used as an evaluative tool that highlights the problems that can arise when competitions are organised. As I argued in the previous chapters, these moral problems are not mere side-effects of an otherwise perfectly desirable and good distribution and organisation mechanism, but are baked into its very nature. In the next chapter, I will apply and demonstrate this framework in the context of a concrete domain: Dutch academia (chapter 7).

Let me start by providing a short overview of the previous chapters to show how they build on each other and pave the way for the current one. In the first, introductory chapter I expressed my concerns about the dominant role that competition plays in contemporary societies. We compete for jobs, funding, college admissions, votes, prizes, prestige, status and power; and in our free time we often engage

in competitive sports and games as well. Competition has many things going for it: it can motivate people to develop their qualities; it puts qualified candidates in the right social positions; it allocates productive assets to their most socially beneficial uses (Hussain, 2020, p. 80); and it can also simply be fun (more on this in section 2). No plausible moral and political account would want to eradicate it altogether. It is clear, however, that competition also raises moral worries, and the question what exactly the *moral limits of competition* are, which is what this dissertation is about.

Given that competition is the central focus of my research project, it was important to clarify what I mean by that. In chapter 2 I developed my definition of ‘competition’ which includes the following elements: (i) there are at least two *participants*; (ii) their *performances* are being *compared* and *ranked*; (iii) *rules* and *procedures* stipulate the process through which participants can win; and (iv) the one who did ‘*best*’, according to the rules, obtains the prized status of ‘*winner*’ and potentially other *scarce goods*. Crucially, I steered clear from idealised textbook descriptions of perfect market competition.

In the more philosophical anthropological chapter 3, I addressed the question whether we are competitive by nature and what the role of institutions is in fostering, limiting and shaping our competitive drives. Building on Jean-Jacques Rousseau, I proposed a gradual account of *amour-propre* and human competitiveness being both inevitable and, importantly, malleable. I argued that deeply rooted competitive drives can remain healthy or go awry, depending on societal, and in particular, institutional circumstances and influences.

Chapter 4 took a closer look at (the competitive organisation of) institutions, including the practices they bear. The chapter combined MacIntyre's concepts of 'practices', 'institutions', 'internal' and 'external goods' and 'virtues' with Sandel's insights about the corrupting effects of monetary incentives, and argued that competition for external goods, too, tends to corrupt practices by pushing away its internal goods. This brought me to my first normative claims about the moral limits of competition, which I called 'the Corruption Argument'. According to this argument, a practice is corrupted when the competition goes at the cost of the practice's internal goods, including the values, norms, virtues and attitudes that we deem appropriate to it.

Chapter 5 explored another line of argument: the Harm Argument, which holds that there is something distinctly harmful about distributing vital goods in a *competitive* manner. I distinguished three harms that are particular to competition: (a) psychological and emotional costs, (b) opportunity costs and (c) estrangement. Regarding (a), distributing vital goods in a competitive manner – where access is determined by how people's performances compare to others – poses social evaluative threats which can lead to stress, anxieties and a lower sense of self-worth among (future) losers and winners alike. In the meantime (b), competitors need to invest more and more time, effort, money and other resources in order not to fall behind compared to others, which is a wasteful process. Finally (c), following Waheed Hussain (2020), competition pits people's wills against each other by design. It is not simply that some people are excluded from a vital good while others do have access to it (this is what all distribution

mechanisms have in common); what is particular to competition is that it gives people strong reasons to disregard one another. Competition thereby harms one's community interests and undermines solidarity.<sup>67</sup> These harms, I argued, are distinctive to competitions and give us *pro tanto* reasons not to distribute vital goods as such.

However, having *pro tanto* reasons not to organise practices and domains competitively still means that competitions can be morally justified *in certain circumstances*, provided that the justifications are strong enough to overrule the *pro tanto* reasons for not doing so. This brings me to the main aim of this current chapter, which is to develop a framework with which we can identify what is morally problematic about specific competitions in concrete domains and practices, while leaving room for the moral advantages to be included as well. Providing an overall ethical evaluation of any given competition and whether and how it should be organised all things considered, however, lies beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Here, the gradual aspect of my understanding of competition comes in again. Two friends attending a relaxing yoga class can be

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<sup>67</sup> Perhaps Hussain would be reluctant of my move to shape his theory into a framework meant to assess concrete competitions. After all, he wrote: "Note that the Estrangement Account is not a mechanical procedure for identifying morally defective RDA's [e.g. competitions]" (Hussain, 2020, p. 97). However, I think that his account will gain strength if it indeed turns out that competition not only gives people strong *reasons* to disregard one another, but also *actually* start to disregard one another. A framework that can assess exactly that can also help Hussain's project of exploring the moral limits of competition.

described as non-competitive, a game of scrabble as somewhat competitive, a selection procedure for a prestigious university as highly competitive and a life-or-death duel as extremely competitive. It helps to use the adjective, ‘competitive’, rather than the noun, ‘competition’. ‘Competition’ as a noun is more static and binary; something is a competition, or it is not. ‘Competitive’, the adjective, gives room to practices and domains being more or less competitive, with varying degrees depending on different factors (such as the height of the stakes and the width of the scope, as I explained in the previous chapter). The more competitive a practice is, the greater the (potential for) corruption, psychological and emotional costs, opportunity costs and estrangement, which means stronger justifications are needed to go ahead with the competition in question. In some cases, the reasons for organising the competition are so strong that a certain level of costs, corruption and estrangement are justified. In other cases, however, the practice or domain needs to be tweaked such that it becomes less competitive or not competitive at all anymore. One could lower the stakes for instance, or make it easier for people to opt out.

In short, this chapter develops a framework with which one can normatively evaluate concrete competitive practices and domains in a gradual and nuanced way; the framework helps us identify the *moral problems* of competitions. First, however, some remarks are appropriate; in section 2, I will expound on the moral advantages of competition why they do not feature in my framework. Then I will develop my evaluative framework step by step, by means of a method that could be called ‘internal analysis’. In section 3 I will explain what

I mean by ‘internal analysis’, after which I apply it to competition in sections 4 and 5. This internal analysis results in a framework that I will present in section 6. The framework consists of two aggravating properties – stakes and scope – and four bad-making properties – corruption, estrangement, opportunity costs and psychological and emotional costs. These properties together constitute my framework by means of which those in the position to evaluate and organise practices and distribute goods can assess competitions. Section 7 concludes.

## **2. On the Advantages of Competition**

While this dissertation is mostly a critique of competition and the competitive society, it would still be good to do justice to some of the arguments in favour of competition, if only to create a more balanced view. So, before I develop my evaluative framework, let me first make some remarks on the advantages of competition.

Competition’s benefits can best be understood in relation to our historical context. The transition from medieval Europe to modernity involved a shift in power relations from aristocratic to democratic rule with its associated institutions of state bureaucracy and civil society. In other words, the hierarchical distribution of power and rewards through patronage networks and heritage was replaced by an allocation through institutionalised rivalry where competition takes place between equals (as in, equal before the law). This does not mean, of course, that aristocratic power and patronage do not exist anymore nor that competition was absent before modernity. The point is rather that



today's institutions are legitimised in virtue of their *rejection* of patronage and their *commitment* to “the idea of fairness in the distribution of power and opportunity [which] is now wedded to equal opportunities to compete, to win on merit” (Hearn, 2021, p. 382).

I do not aim to provide an exhaustive overview of the advantages of competition in light of this historical background. Instead, I will briefly discuss three main arguments that are used to legitimise competitive institutions in contemporary liberal democracies, namely (1) efficiency, (2) positive consequences and (3) fairness. I zoom in on the labour market specifically, as this is a domain where competition is typically considered desirable. Note that, when considering other kinds of competition, as in games, sports, in relationships or on the work floor, these arguments can play out differently and other considerations might become more important.

(1) *Efficiency*. Provided that future performances of workers can be accurately predicted, hiring workers who are expected to perform better is typically more efficient from an employer's point of view (Fishkin, 2014, p. 28). Workers who (will) perform badly can cost an organisation or a company money. Besides, other workers might have to make up for the lack of performance of their colleague, which also takes time and effort. These are costs that can be avoided by hiring ‘the best’ candidate, which is typically done through a competitive hiring procedure.

From a macro-economic perspective, such competitive selection procedures aim to put the right people in the right place in the social order. Competition can be regarded as a ‘tool’, as it were, to

match available economic positions to people with the right talents who voluntarily apply for these jobs. In such a system with various opportunities and ‘careers open to talents’, people are encouraged to develop their potential talents and increase their human capital.

(2) *Positive consequences*. Apart from efficiency, competition is also assumed to generate positive outcomes more generally (Lütge, 2019; Agmon, 2022). Competition between academics is presumed to encourage truth-finding; to promote justice in the courtroom; and to lead to more efficient use of resources overall.

To reiterate my points from chapter 2 (section 3), Agmon distinguishes between two concepts of competition, one of which is called ‘parallel competition’.<sup>68</sup> In the case of parallel competition, two separate, independent pathways or ‘lanes’ are created for each competitor and within every lane, each is supposed to try their best to win. Here, the social benefit is meant to emerge “as a result of the aggregate effect created by the efforts of each competitor” (Agmon, 2022, p. 7). Insofar as competitive job markets are parallel competitions

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<sup>68</sup> The other one is called ‘friction competition’, where friction is constitutive to how competitors win or lose. Its goal is to facilitate a clash between the competitors and “this clash is supposed to generate a desirable social outcome” (Agmon, 2022, p. 7). The court case is a paradigmatic and ideal-typical example of this, where both parties engage in an exchange of arguments meant to refute the opponent and cancel out each other’s biases. Eventually truth and justice are supposed to prevail in the impartial tribunal’s verdict (Agmon, 2022, p. 13). While both friction and parallel competition arguably lead to social benefits, I stick to parallel competition in the main text as friction competition seems less relevant to the topic of the labour market.

– where each (potential) applicant develops their own qualities and human capital – the aggregate outcomes are those of efficiency, added social value (in the form of goods and services) and economic growth.

(3) *Fairness*. Finally, competitions, and employment in particular, are often considered a fair way of allocating scarce resources (here, jobs). This argument in favour of competition has intuitive appeal. When two applicants, person *A* and *B*, apply for a job and *A* is clearly the better candidate, it seems unfair if *B* were to get the job due to, say, favouritism or nepotism on the part of the selection committee. Considering our historical context, it is exactly favouritism that we wanted to leave behind in the distribution of power and rewards.

Competition as a distributive tool and selection mechanism is often considered fair because it arguably tracks *merit*. Following Gideon Elford (2023), the just or fair thing to do in labour markets is not only to remove legal barriers and to avoid discrimination; meritocratic equality of opportunity would also require us to select applicants according to whoever is best qualified. In other words, it requires that competitions for positions and advantages are formally fair, but also that the criteria for success should be determined by whatever it is that makes one the best qualified person to perform the role. According to Thomas Mulligan (2018),

Competition is built into justice. To say that there is scarcity is to say that there are at least two people who want some thing, and that, no matter how the matter is resolved, at least one will walk away unsatisfied. “Meritocracy” has a connotation of

competition which some people find off-putting, but I ask these readers to keep in mind that competition is not just socially inevitable—it is *essential* to distributive justice. (Mulligan, 2018, p. 20)

Mulligan makes a similar point than Hussain and I do (Hussain in *Pitting People Against Each Other* (2018) and I in chapter 5). Unfortunately, he argues, jobs are scarce, so one person's efforts to realise one's goals and aspirations in life necessarily come at the cost of others who have similar goals and aspirations. It is widely recognised that this is a source of sadness in the world, he adds. Mulligan's solution, however, is not to limit competition, but to organise fair competitions: "Although we may never be able to give all people all the jobs that they want, we can, now, provide a fair competitive framework. This is what meritocracy does" (2018, p. 107).

For Mulligan, the link between competition and fairness, understood in meritocratic terms, seems to go both ways. The fair thing to do would be to allocate scarce goods (at least those for jobs and income) competitively. Yet, justice demands as well "that competition take place on a level playing field" (Mulligan, 2018, p. 4). So often, the fair thing to do would be to organise competitions which in turn need to be fair. If a person overtakes their peers in the race for social advantage, it should be because that person is more meritorious than the others, not because of factors such as skin colour or family connections.

It is impossible to do justice to the literature on the advantages of competition. My aims here have been modest, namely, to

acknowledge that there are indeed good arguments in favour of competition (which tend to revolve around efficiency, good outcomes and fairness). As such, the evaluative framework I am going to develop in the remainder of this chapter is inevitably *partial*, as it focuses on the moral *problems* that competition raises.

Note that the arguments in favour of competition that I just mentioned are mostly situated at the level of *aggregates* or *systems*, whereas my arguments against competition take place at the level of the *lived experiences of (individual) participants*. From a systemic point of view, competition might lead to the efficient use of resources and economic growth, while the participants of a specific competitive practice might be on the verge of burnout and feel estranged from one another. Weighing off both types of arguments will inevitably be a difficult task, since they are situated at different levels.<sup>69</sup> This makes it difficult to develop a framework that includes both the advantages and the disadvantages, as one is comparing two very different things with one another.

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<sup>69</sup> The two levels overlap as well. Fair contest is important at a systemic level, as it contributes to an overall just society, but individual participants also have an interest in competitions being fair. Moreover, the moral problems I identified can (indirectly) have an impact on the system as well. For example, opportunity costs experienced by many individuals lead to inefficiencies at the aggregate level. So, while the difference between the system level and the lived experience level is not clearcut, my point is that weighing both off against each other, in one comprehensive evaluative framework, will be a challenge.

Despite this difficulty, I do acknowledge however that all things considered evaluations of competitions in concrete domains and practices should take both advantages and problems into account. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to engage in this endeavour. However, as will become clear in sections 4 and 5, due to the gradual nature of my framework, my analysis does explicitly leave room for the moral advantages of competition to be ‘plugged in’ into the analysis, as it were.

Note that my focus on the moral problems of competition should be understood in light of the goal of my dissertation, which is to question the self-evidence with which competition is introduced and taken for granted. So, rather than seeing my framework as a tool to evaluate concrete domains and practices *all things considered*, it should instead be understood as a way to give the downsides of competition the attention they deserve when evaluating such domains and practices, and mitigate these downsides where possible. As such, it can help assess whether, when and how to organise a competition. Instead of merely assuming that competition is overall a good thing, we should weigh off its advantages against its problems, which my framework highlights. And even when we decide that a given competition is indeed desirable overall – a decision that falls outside of the scope of my dissertation – the job is not done. As the problems that my framework identifies are not mere unfortunate side-effects, but *internal* to competition, one should look for ways to address or mitigate them.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will provide an explanation and application of my internal analysis, which will result in my

framework that ties together the various arguments on the moral problems of competition from chapters 4 and 5 in a way that is useful and applicable when assessing specific competitions in the actual world.

### **3. Internal Analysis: Explanation**

By ‘internal analysis’ I simply mean that my definition of competition already contains the elements that potentially makes it morally problematic. If we want to determine the desirability of competition in a given domain or practice, following this analysis, we need to go back to how that specific competition plays out in practice and assess whether we should adjust one or some of its features to keep it within moral limits. Formulated in more general terms: if one engages in the method of internal analysis, one normatively assesses a given phenomenon in the context of a concrete domain or practice by assessing what the moral status and implications are of those features (rather than using an external standard as a kind of measuring rod). The framework that I develop in this chapter will do exactly that; it contains different features or properties of competition that can take shape differently in different contexts. How morally problematic the competition in that specific domain or practice is, depends on how these properties play out.

This method differs from other approaches in analytical, Anglo-American philosophy which tend to start from a given theory or principle and analyse the phenomenon ‘externally’ through that lens. A

consequentialist would consider the positive and negative effects of competition in terms of say, utility or welfare, and determine on that basis whether the competition is morally problematic. Simply put, if the competition is positive-sum it is morally desirable and if it is negative-sum it is not. Egalitarians, in turn, would assess the moral desirability of a competition by looking at whether the demands of their preferred form of equality have been met, such as formal equality, equality of opportunity or relational equality. A Rawlsian in particular, would consider whether a competitive institution is just by looking first at whether it respects people's basic freedoms and second whether it meets equality of opportunity and the difference principle. To be clear, these are legitimate approaches, nor does it mean that my analysis is not concerned with consequences and equality at all; it definitely is.<sup>70</sup>

What is distinctive about my internal analysis, however, is that it puts *competition*, and what is particular about it, at the centre of attention, not some general theory or principle which then needs to be applied. Moreover, my approach is intimately connected to concrete practices and domains. Competition, and its moral desirability, cannot be understood and evaluated in abstraction, only in relation to how its features manifest themselves in practice. This way, my internal analysis can lead to different and richer conclusions than other approaches where general principles and theories are applied to a given phenomenon. At the end of the chapter, after I have rolled out my internal analysis and

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<sup>70</sup> For example, my framework will be sensitive to the effects of competition on our self-esteem and whether 'winning' and 'losing' a competition exacerbates inequalities.



explained my framework, I will come back to how my analysis leads to different results than ‘external’ approaches, such as consequentialism and the Rawlsian conception of justice.

#### **4. Internal Analysis: Application (Part 1)**

Now that I have explained what I mean by ‘internal analysis’, let me continue by using it in the context of competition in practice. Given the intimate connection between what competition *is* and what is morally problematic about it, depending on the context, I start off with my definition of competition:

*An arrangement – typically an allocation mechanism or selection procedure – is competitive when its rules stipulate a procedure through which participants can secure the prized status of ‘winner’ and possibly other desirable scarce goods (such as recognition, prizes, jobs and grants). The procedure is designed to compare the participants’ performances and rank them accordingly. Participants who are ranked highest, as stipulated by the rules, can claim the status of ‘winners’ and receive (a greater measure of) scarce goods at the cost of participants who are ranked lower – the ‘losers’ – who get none of the desirable scarce goods (or in smaller measure).*

Note that this definition mostly refers to concrete, real life competitions that are governed by institutional rules, such as those for jobs,

promotions, grants, market share, access to (prestigious) universities, sports tournaments and the status, prestige, prizes, money and power that go along with winning them.

Scarce goods are a central element of my definition of competition, but, as we have seen, there are also other ways of allocating scarce goods. My internal analysis therefore continues by identifying the scarce good in question and determining whether a mutually exclusive performance-based distribution is appropriate at all. Take three scarce goods: access to a six-year surgical residency, access to basic health care<sup>71</sup> and travel money at a philosophy department.

Consider first access to surgical residency, which is specialised training at a hospital to eventually become a surgeon. In the Netherlands, after one has finished a six-year degree in medicine, one can apply for this highly competitive six-year surgical residency. As we have seen, it is characteristic of competition that it provides access to scarce goods (here, access to the residency) based on the participants' relative performances. The rules determine the procedure through which competitors can win (i.e. get access) and which kinds of performances are relevant. If we were to give an overall assessment of this specific competition, this would be a good moment to also consider and weigh the advantages. For example, given the nature of the job as

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<sup>71</sup> This good is scarce because there is a limit to the amount of time and resources that are available. General practitioners can only help an  $X$  number of patients a day. Only an  $X$  amount of public money is invested in health care. And, as we have seen during the (beginnings of the) Covid-19 pandemic, intensive care beds, masks and vaccines were not easily available.

a surgeon – performing complicated operations where people’s lives are at stake – it makes sense to want to select the best candidates and formulate the selection criteria accordingly. When we organise access to a surgical residency in a non-competitive way, we can arguably even speak of *a lack of competition*. Imagine that access is provided to everyone who has finished the six-year medical degree and wants to become a surgeon. Or imagine that access is provided based on a lottery, among a pool of candidates who has finished the medical degree. While these candidates might all be suitable for the specialised training in virtue of their medical degree, there are good reasons to only want to select *the best* among them to help as many people as good as possible. For the sake of the patients, there are good reasons to want to avoid that merely mediocre medical students get accepted for the surgical residency. So, while there are advantages to opting for a competitive selection procedure – saving lives matter<sup>72</sup> – the analysis doesn’t stop here. Even if we recognise that a competitive selection procedure has benefits, there are still moral concerns that should be taken seriously, which is precisely for the focus of this dissertation: the moral problems

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<sup>72</sup> A consequentialist would agree that saving lives is an important moral consideration, since it is considered a good outcome of competition: applicants are incentivised to develop their skills and get better at whatever is needed to become a good medical professional, but competition also serves as a mechanism for identifying and selecting the best candidates, all of which eventually benefits the patients. A Rawlsian would look at whether (medical) careers are open to talents and whether the resulting inequalities (a relatively high salary for the surgeon) benefit the worst off in society (who in turn have access to basic health care).

of competition. Some of these problems are more morally worrisome than others. So, to assess the gravity of these moral worries, we need a framework, which will be the outcome of my internal analysis.

For the other scarce good, access to basic health care, things are different. Given the nature of health care – helping patients *in need* – it would not make sense to only provide this service to those who end up at the top of some performance ranking (especially since patients are almost per definition the most vulnerable of the population). Even in times of extreme scarcity, such as the lack of intensive care beds during the Covid-19 pandemic, a competition-based triage is out of the question. Surely, in this concrete case, there might be some arguments in favour of competition as well, which should definitely be taken into account if we were to give an overall assessment. For now I would say, given the nature of the scarce good (access to the basic health care), it would be much more appropriate instead to provide access on a need-basis, possibly accompanied by a first-come-first-serve system.<sup>73</sup>

So, assuming that access to basic health care should *not* be distributed competitively, the framework that I will present in section 6 is not relevant here, since even the slightest degree of competition is morally problematic here. Put differently, the *pro tanto* reasons not to organise access to basic health care are arguably so strong, that no form of competition is acceptable, so there is no need to then also apply my framework that assesses competition in a gradual way. My analysis of

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<sup>73</sup> Or, if problems of access are structural, an increase in the number of doctors and resources relative to the number of patients is desirable.

whether or not to organise access to basic health care competitively stops here.

Finally, regarding the distribution of the scarce good of money, there is nothing in its nature that compels us to choose one allocation mechanism over another. In other words, contrary to access to surgical residency and access to basic health care services, there is nothing inherent to money that makes one allocation mechanism more desirable than another. To see whether a competitive distribution is the most desirable option, we should therefore look at the context of the practice more concretely. Take the scarce good of travel budget at a philosophy department for example. Relevant questions to be asked are: do we want ‘the best’ employees, according to some performance measure, to get most of the money and if so, how much? Which criteria are going to be used? Typical for a competitive practice, for instance, is that the rules and criteria are designed to winnow better from worse candidates, where those at the top get (more of) the scarce good whereas the others get less or even nothing. Is this desirable in the case of travel money at a philosophy department? More information, including about the advantages of this competition, is needed to assess whether this is the case overall. In section 6, I will apply my framework that focusses on the *downsides* of competition to the case of travel money.

In short, we saw that it is arguably not desirable to organise access to basic health care competitively. Given the nature of this scarce good, any degree of competition seems morally undesirable. For the scarce good of access to surgical residency, however, competition is presumably the most desirable distribution mechanism, given

competition's ability of aiming to winnow better (performing) from worse (performing) candidates, which is important if we want to attend patients adequately. For the travel budget at a philosophy department, competition *could be* defensible if we look at the practice more broadly, or maybe not. More context is needed, which brings us to the next step of my internal analysis, which will eventually lead to my framework (section 6).

## **5. Internal Analysis: Application (Part 2)**

The next step of my internal analysis is to identify whether and in which ways competition becomes morally problematic, depending on how its features or properties play out in practice. To this end, I turn the two aspects of competition, stakes and scope (as explained in chapter 5), the Corruption Argument (from chapter 4), the Harm Argument (from chapter 5) into one overarching and useable framework meant to normatively assess the downsides of concrete competitive domains and practices.

I will label the stakes and the scope 'aggravating properties' and corruption, psychological and emotional costs, opportunity costs and estrangement 'bad-making properties'. The different properties characterise the degree of competitiveness of a practice or domain (the higher the stakes, the more competitive a practice), but they are also

normatively relevant (the higher the stakes, the more morally problematic it becomes).<sup>74</sup>

The properties of stakes and scope are different from the other four in the sense that stakes and scope should be seen as sliders that can aggravate or alleviate the other properties. The higher the stakes and the wider the scope, the higher the (potential for) corruption, psychological and emotional costs, opportunity costs and estrangement. And vice versa, if we keep the stakes of the competitive domain/practice low and the scope narrow, the different arguments lose part of their weight. This is why the stakes and the scope of a competition should be seen as *aggravating properties*; they are ‘properties’ because they determine the competitiveness of a practice/domain and they are ‘aggravating’ because sliding them ‘up’ (or ‘down’) aggravates (or diminishes) the competitiveness of a practice/domain.

Corruption, psychological and emotional costs, opportunity costs and estrangement, in turn, should be seen as *bad-making properties*. They are ‘properties’ in the sense that they denote what is distinctly morally problematic about *competitive* arrangements (as I have argued in chapters 4 and 5). They, too, come in degrees. For instance, estrangement may not occur at all under the right circumstances (say, when participating in a low stake competition), but competitors may also be very hostile towards each other in their strive

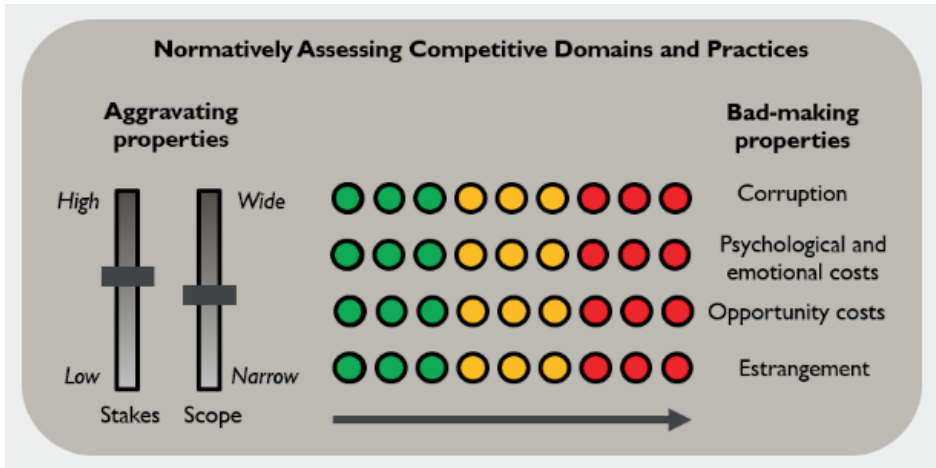
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<sup>74</sup> In a similar way, age is descriptive as well as normative, since your age is a characteristic of you, but it also determines whether you are allowed to drink alcohol, vote or retire.

to win (say, in a life or death dual). To visualise what I have in mind, see the dashboard in Image 1.

### Image 1

#### *Normatively Assessing Competitive Domains and Practices*



The sliders on the left represent the stakes and the scope and can be moved up and down. The position of the sliders has an impact on the different bad-making properties, represented by the series of lights in the middle of the image. The further the sliders are up, the higher the stakes and/or the wider the scope and the more likely it is that the lights of the bad-making property will move towards orange or even red. This means that the practice or domain is getting increasingly competitive. The more the bad-making properties move towards orange or red, the stronger the *pro tanto* reasons against the competition and the stronger the justifications will have to be to outweigh those *pro tanto* reasons.



Alternatively, the stronger the reasons we have to diminish the competitiveness by lowering the stakes and narrowing the scope.

Per aggravating and bad-making property, I present a number of questions that need to be asked by those who are in the position to evaluate competitive practices and those who can make decisions on how to distribute goods. These questions will help to make nuanced evaluations of competition's desirability and make informed decisions on how to diminish the competitiveness by tweaking the stakes and the scope.

### *Stakes*

When assessing the stakes of a competition, social evaluators and decision makers should ask questions such as, how big are the rewards for the winners? Are these rewards in proportion to their achievements? How much are these rewards going to help the current winners in future competitions? What are the success rates? What do the 'losers' miss out on? Do these 'losers' still have enough chances of winning other/future competitions? What are the costs of opting out?

### *Scope*

When assessing the scope of a competition, social evaluators and decision makers should ask questions such as, how wide do the benefits of winning the competition in question reach? In other words, to how many other goods does winning this particular competition give one access to? Within a given domain or practice, is there still enough room for people not to be judged on their relative performances? Situating

this competition within a broader practice/domain, is this competition really needed, or does it only add a competitive element to an already competitive practice/domain? At which levels does competition take place (organisation – department – individual)?

The higher the stakes and the wider the scope, the more likely it is that the bad-making properties of corruption, psychological and emotional costs, opportunity costs and estrangement occur or get worse.

### *Corruption*

It is to be expected that high stakes and a wide scope tend to lead to more corruption. The more important the scarce external goods at stake, the more people are incentivised to obtain them, even if this means sacrificing the cooperative care and virtue that are needed for the realisation of internal goods. With high stakes, one is incentivised to ‘cheat’ and do whatever is needed to *appear* well, otherwise they lose out on vital goods, also if this goes at the cost of the attitudes and behaviours we deem important to realise internal goods. Likewise, if the scope is very wide, that is, if (almost) every aspect of the practice is about winning external goods, it is not surprising that people lose sight of what the practice really is about: realising its internal goods in a virtuous manner.

When assessing whether a practice is corrupted and how much, social evaluators and decision makers should ask the following questions. What do we value about a given practice? Which goods to we deem ‘internal’ to a practice? Which attitudes, virtues and

behaviours do we deem appropriate to a practice and are these the attitudes and behaviours practitioners actually employ? Are there any attitudes, virtues and behaviours that put the realisation of internal goods into danger (think of fraud) and how prevalent are they? To what extent are the criteria in place to select ‘the top performing’ practitioners a reflection of who is actually excellent, given the practice’s internal goods? Do competitively acquired external goods have a signalling function for who is actually at the top or ‘excellent’ or is there a discrepancy between who is good at ‘the scoring game’ versus who is good at the practice?

### *Psychological and Emotional Costs*

Also here, high stakes and a wide scope likely lead to higher psychological and emotional costs. If the success rates are low and the rewards for the winners big, while losers miss out on these rewards, then standing out compared to others becomes even more important. This may result in performance pressure, stress and anxiety. Also, a wide scope means that people are (almost) constantly being evaluated compared to others, and rewarded if one stands out, with little space to be free from competitive evaluations. This might create the false impression that one’s worth depends on one’s relative position.

When assessing whether psychological and emotional costs occur, and how much, social evaluators and decision makers should ask the following questions. How many aspects of a domain or practice involve making comparisons and hierarchies between people’s performances? How high is the work pressure? How stressed, anxious

and insecure about their worth do the parties involved feel about competing all the time, for such vital goods?

### *Opportunity Costs*

Again, higher stakes and a wider scope are expected to result in higher opportunity costs. If the rewards at stake are big and acceptance rates low, people have to invest (or, waste) large amounts of time, money and effort into standing out in order to obtain this reward. Just compare access to a prestigious university to access to a non-prestigious university; for the former, applicants have to jump through many more hoops to make it. Likewise, if most aspects of a domain or practice consist of competing, then the parties involved will spend much of their time and resources keeping up or improving their relative position. Finally, those organising the competitions also need to spend (or, waste) vast amounts of time evaluating and weighing people's performances.

So, when evaluating competition in a specific domain and deciding whether goods should be distributed competitively, a couple of questions should be asked. How much time, money and other types of investments are put into improving one's chances of winning? How many people eventually won, i.e., for how many people did the investments pay off? How many people did not win, despite their investments, that is, which investments did not yield immediate returns and are therefore (arguably) wasted?

### *Estrangement*

Regarding the final bad-making property, also here, higher stakes and a wider scope tend to lead to more estrangement than when the stakes were lower and scope narrower. The more substantial the scarce goods at stake are, the stronger the reasons to disregard one another. In competitions for vital goods, it is in the involved parties interests to engage in strategic interactions, otherwise they miss out on something important (for example, access to basic health care or financial stability). Likewise, if the scope is wide, that is, if people are actively pitted against each other in most aspects of a domain or practice, the more reasons they have to disregard one another. There is simply hardly any space left where their wills are not turned against each other by design.

For social evaluators and policy makers, the following questions help to assess whether and how estrangement manifests itself. Do the different parties involved see each other as colleagues or competitors (or both, perhaps)? Do the parties engage in strategic interactions when it comes to securing scarce and desirable goods (think of hiding information that could help others and responding tactically and calculatedly to the behaviours of others)? Is there indifference, enmity, jealousy and distrust among the parties involved?

### *Interplay Bad-Making Properties*

The various bad-making properties can be considered in their own right and none of them is fully reducible to the other. The bad-making property of corruption mostly focusses on the *practice* itself, and

whether its internal goods stay intact when competition is introduced. The bad-making properties of psychological and emotional costs and estrangement focus more on the *people* involved, including their wellbeing, sense of self-worth and how they relate to one another. The bad-making property of opportunity costs, finally, concerns mostly the *time and resources* spent on one thing over the other.

However, these four bad-making properties partially overlap and can mutually affect one another. Take corruption. When people are estranged from each other, they will have a hard time realising internal goods in a virtuous manner, which is pre-eminently a cooperative endeavour. Likewise, stress and insecurity about one's own capacities might prevent people from fruitfully engaging in a practice's internal goods. Or perhaps people spend lots of time chasing external goods and tokens of success, which is time not spent on actually participating in the practice itself. As such, (the bad-making properties of) emotional and opportunity costs can contribute to (the bad-making property of) corruption.

Yet, the former bad-making properties can also manifest themselves in the absence of corruption, where practices are understood in a strict MacIntyrean sense. Consider a labour market in a domain that does not involve any practice. Arguably, working as an order picker for Amazon does not involve the realisation of internal goods – which might actually be part of the reason why it is an onerous job in the first place. Yet, order pickers can still be pitted against each other and suffer from psychological and emotional costs and estrangement due to such competition.

Similarly, people can suffer psychological and emotional costs, without also being estranged from one another or without suffering opportunity costs. Likewise, people can be estranged from one another, but have good self-esteem and little opportunity costs. The same can be said with regards to opportunity costs in relation to the other bad-making properties.

That said, it is difficult to imagine cases of corruption that do not also involve some of the other bad-making properties. Though conceptually distinct, it seems to be more difficult to adopt the right (and virtuous) attitudes towards the internal goods of a practice while suffering serious psychological and emotional costs, being severely estranged from one another and/or only spending time chasing external goods. Given how corruption tends to be linked to competition's other bad-making property, the moral objections against competition tend to become really severe once corruption occurs.

## **6. The Framework and How it Should Be Used**

My internal analysis – that put the phenomenon of competition, and what is particular about it, at the centre of attention, and derived aggravating- and bad-making properties from there – culminates in a framework that can be used to assess the competitiveness of concrete practices and domains, and whether this competitiveness is morally problematic (see Table 2 below). The framework is basically a summary of section 5.

**Table 2**

*Framework to Normatively Evaluate the Competitiveness of Practices and Domains*

2. Bad-making properties		
1. Aggravating properties	The practice itself	The involved parties
<p><i>I.a. Stakes (higher or lower)</i></p> <p>What are the success rates? How big are the rewards for the winners and how much are they going to help in future competitions? What do the ‘losers’ miss out on and do these ‘losers’ still have enough chances of winning other/future competitions? What are the costs of opting out?</p>	<p><i>2.a. Corruption (more or less)</i></p> <p>What do we value about a given practice? Which goods to we deem ‘internal’ to a practice? Are there any attitudes, virtues and behaviours that put the realisation of internal goods into danger (think of fraud) and how prevalent are they? To what extent are the criteria in place to select ‘the best performing’ practitioners a reflection of who is actually excellent, given the</p>	<p><i>2.b. Psychological &amp; emotional costs (higher or lower)</i></p> <p>How high is the work pressure? How stressed, anxious and insecure about their worth do the parties involved feel about competing all the time, for such vital goods?</p>
<p><i>I.b. Scope (wider or narrower)</i></p>		<p><i>2.c. Opportunity costs (higher or lower)</i></p>



<p>How many other goods does winning this particular competition give one access to? Is there still enough room for people not to be judged on their relative performances? At which levels does competition take place?</p>	<p>practice's internal goods? Is there a discrepancy between who is good at 'the scoring game' versus who is actually good at the practice?</p>	<p>How much investments are put into improving one's chances of winning and evaluating performances of competitors? Whose investments did not yield immediate returns and are therefore (arguably) wasted?</p>
<p><i>2.d. Estrangement (more or less)</i></p> <p>Do the different parties involved see each other as colleagues or competitors? Do the parties engage in strategic interactions? Is there indifference, enmity, jealousy and distrust among the parties involved?</p>		

Let me illustrate the foregoing framework by means of the two scarce goods mentioned earlier: access to the highly selective surgical residency and the travel budget at a philosophy department. We have already established that competition is a desirable way of distributing selecting the best future surgeons. We want the best candidates, according to relevant criteria, to get such jobs, because they will be capable of providing the best care to patients. Other, non-competitive selection or allocation mechanisms simply cannot do the important work of winnowing ‘the best’ from ‘worse’ candidates. So, the reasons in favour of a competitive selection procedure might outweigh the *pro tanto* reasons not to organise it competitively.

However, even if we agree that competition is appropriate here, there can still be something morally problematic about the selection procedure, depending on how it is organised. In Table 3 I sketch a situation where the stakes are high and the scope wide, thereby aggravating the bad-making properties of corruption, psychological and emotional costs, opportunity costs and estrangement. In this case, the competitiveness of the practice of surgery should be diminished by lowering the stakes should and narrowing the scope.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Note that the point of the surgeon example is not to teach us anything about surgery. The point, instead, is to briefly illustrate how my framework can be used in practice.

**Table 3***Normatively Assessing a Competitive Selection Procedure for Surgical Residency in Context*

1. Aggravating properties	2. Bad-making properties	
<i>1.a. Stakes (higher or lower)</i>	<b>The practice itself</b>	<b>The involved parties</b>
<p>The stakes can be considered high when the training to become a surgeon consist of a series of competitions, starting already in high school (where one needs to have good grades to get accepted to med school), each with low acceptance rates. The stakes are high when those with a relatively mediocre score in one round are kicked out entirely. The stakes are high when the salary,</p>	<p><i>2.a. Corruption (more or less)</i></p> <p>The more there is a mismatch between selection and what it means to be a good surgeon, the more the surgery practice is corrupted. The more the competition impedes the candidates from (collaboratively) achieving the goods that are internal to the surgery practice, the more it is corrupted. The more the internal</p>	<p><i>2.b. Psychological &amp; emotional costs (higher or lower)</i></p> <p>The more stress, anxiety and insecurities about one's worth the candidates suffer, the more harmful the competitive selection procedure is.</p>

<p>status and prestige that comes with ‘winning’ and eventually becoming a surgeon are high.</p>	<p>goods and virtues of the profession – such as, concern for patients and a genuine interest in getting better – are undermined by the competitive selection procedure, the more the practice is corrupted. The more the candidates come to treat the surgical residency as a game for external goods, instead of from a genuine care for patients, the more corrupted the practice is.</p>	
<p><i>1.b. Scope (wider or narrower)</i> The scope is wide when many aspects of the medical training/medical profession are organised competitively. For example, the scope becomes wider if, apart from passing the competitive selection procedure, the work floor, in turn, is also competitive. The scope is wider if the competition does not only take place at the level of the candidates, but also at other levels (such as between different universities,</p>		<p><i>2.b. Opportunity costs (higher or lower)</i> The more time, money and other resources candidates invest in gaining access to the residency, and the more of this time, money and other resources does not pay off (for the ‘losers’), the more of these resources are wasted.</p>

<p>hospitals or even countries), where competition on one level (say, between hospitals) has an impact on other levels (how candidates are selected)</p>	<p><i>2.d. Estrangement (more or less)</i></p> <p>The more (future) medical professionals come to see each other as competitors, instead of colleagues who see care for patients as their common goal, the more estranged they are. The more candidates disregard one another, the more estranged they are.</p>
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Let's consider again the travel budget that a philosophy department distributes among its staff to make research trips. One might argue that it makes sense to give a higher budget to better performing academics in the department, where the rules of the competition define 'better performances' as more publications in top journals for instance. The successful academics deserve to travel more, one might say. However, when we situate the (competitive) distribution of this scarce good in the broader context of academia, there are also compelling reasons *not* to allocate this good competitively.

First, considering the aggravating property of scope, academia already consists of quite a few competitions, such as early career academics competing for (short-term) contracts, without the certainty of landing a permanent position any time soon; academics competing for ever more publications, preferably in good journals; and when an academic obtains a grant, that person receives lots of status, respect and the means to produce even more research output. These competitions are clustered together in the sense that, more publications lead to greater chances of landing a job and getting a grant, and the research project that is being funded by the grant likely leads to more publications. Choosing to distribute travel money in a competitive manner as well means that another competition is added to this cluster of competitions. This would again be another aspect of the profession where one's relative performance (in terms of publication success) matters. This increase of scope would therefore be worrisome, also when we consider the other aggravating property: stakes.

By distributing the travel money in a competitive way, we also increase the stakes of the competition, since we introduce a competitive reward that wasn't previously there. Making the distribution of travel money dependent on people's academic successes compared to others, means that the wins for the 'winners' and the losses for the 'losers' are exacerbated. Only those who perform well (that is, better than others) will be able to go to conferences for valuable peer feedback and to network, which, in turn, helps to move their career forward. Those who perform worse (that is, worse than others), will get less or no money to increase their network, which lowers their chances of remaining in the profession. Distributing travel money in a competitive way therefore increases the stakes within the domain of academia.

Moving the sliders of 'scope' and 'stakes' up can therefore have an aggravating effect on competition's bad-making properties: opportunity costs, psychological costs, estrangement and corruption. See Table 4.

**Table 4***Normatively Assessing the Competitive Distribution of Travel Money in a Philosophy Department*

1. Aggravating properties		2. Bad-making properties	
<i>1.a. Stakes (higher or lower)</i>	Distributing travel money competitively (based on academic success) increases the stakes, where the ‘successful’ colleagues get extra opportunities to develop themselves at conferences, while the ‘less and unsuccessful ones’ have fewer opportunities to do so, thereby exacerbating inequalities.	<b>The practice itself</b>	<b>The involved parties</b>
<i>1.b. Scope (wider or narrower)</i>		<i>2.a. Corruption (more or less)</i> Increased stakes and scope risks corrupting philosophy. With the change of rules (where the allocation depends on competitive evaluation criteria) and an increased focus on obtaining external goods (not only jobs and funding, but also travel money), the practice of philosophy itself	<i>2.b. Psychological &amp; emotional costs (higher or lower)</i> The psychological and emotional costs might also increase since there is now another part of the profession where academics’ professional worth depends on how they compare to others.
			<i>2.b. Opportunity costs (higher or lower)</i>



<p>Distributing travel money competitively (based on academic success) only adds to an already competitive domain (academia) and practice (philosophy), where competitions for jobs, grants, and ever more publications play a big role.</p>	<p>changes, at the cost of internal goods.</p>	<p>Increased stakes and scope will give academics only extra reasons to invest (or waste) time and effort into keeping up, otherwise they are ‘out of the game’.</p> <p><i>2.d. Estrangement (more or less)</i></p> <p>Increased stakes and scope give colleagues more reasons to disregard one another, since one colleague’s success necessarily goes at the cost of another colleague’s success. Why work together and share ideas if that might mean that the other person can go to an interesting conference, instead of you.</p>
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Alternative allocation mechanisms would mitigate the inequalities between ‘successful’ and ‘unsuccessful’ academics who are already competing for jobs and grants. Take an equal distribution, even if that means that everyone gets a moderate amount of money due to a limited total travel budget. Regardless of one’s academic performances then, everyone gets to visit some conferences and gain some relevant contacts and feedback on their papers, which also helps those with fewer publications to make progress in their work. A prioritarian distribution, in turn, where academics would need to justify why they need to travel (more than others) is another option, where those who would benefit most from the trip get the money. Or think of a lottery system, where a certain sum of money is allocated randomly. It is questionable whether the latter two systems – prioritarian and lottery – are superior to competition all things considered, but at least they prevent some of the harms that are typical of competitions, harms which we have *pro tanto* reasons to avoid. That is, they prevent the further institutionalisation of inequalities based on one’s relative performances. Equal distribution seems to be the preferred option here because it would give everyone the same material means to develop themselves as academics by means of trips abroad, thereby narrowing the scope and lowering the stakes of competition in academia more generally. And importantly, this distribution doesn’t face all the objections that competitive distributions face.

Finally, let me point out again that my analysis can lead to different results than consequentialist and Rawlsian approaches. A consequentialist would merely add up the plusses and minuses in terms

of, say, utility or welfare, as it would do with any other phenomenon under scrutiny and conclude that the competitive selection procedure to become a surgeon and the competitive allocation of travel money at the philosophy department is morally desirable if it leads to a net increase in, say, welfare or utility (compared to other distributions). My method, however, looks beyond mere welfare or utility and puts competition at the centre of attention. As the bad-making properties of corruption and estrangement indicate, for instance, we lose something fundamental if competition undermines the realisation of internal goods and people become estranged from one another, even if this has no or positive welfare effects.

A Rawlsian analysis, in turn, would merely stop when fairness has been achieved; questions about additional moral problems are simply beyond its scope (as long as fair equality of opportunity is not undermined). My method would say that the competitive selection procedure to become a surgeon and the competitive allocation of the travel budget can still be morally problematic, even if fair equality of opportunity has been achieved. These arrangements are morally problematic, on my analysis, for instance when they incur substantial psychological and emotional costs and opportunity costs. And in the case of the travel budget, distributing it competitively would only increase the stakes and widen the scope of an already competitive domain, which is academia.

In short, contrary to a consequentialist, who deems the competitive distribution morally desirable if it leads to positive net outcomes in utility or welfare, and contrary to a Rawlsian analysis,

which stops when the Equality Principle and the Difference Principle have been met, my approach requires stronger justificatory reasons for the competition to be permissible, since self-esteem, internal goods and human relationships are at stake. These aspects simply get overlooked if we try to apply an already pre-determined principle external to the phenomenon of competition (such as wellbeing maximisation or procedural fairness).

## **7. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I developed and demonstrated the method of internal analysis, which resulted in a framework to normatively assess the competitiveness of concrete domains and practices. Within this analysis, the conceptual (what characterises competition; see chapter 2) and the normative (why or when does a competition become morally problematic; see chapters 3-5) are intimately connected. Given that it is definitional to competition that it distributes scarce goods based on people's relative performances, where the ones at the top of the ranking get (more of) this scarce good, while those lower down do not get it or get less of it, it is not surprising that problems occur. To assess the extent of these moral problems, I distinguished two aggravating properties, stakes and scope, and four bad-making properties, corruption, psychological and emotional costs, opportunity costs and estrangement.

The stakes and the scope should be seen as sliders that can go up and down. Higher stakes and a wider scope (by metaphorically

moving the sliders upwards) also aggravate the bad-making properties and make the competition in question increasingly morally problematic. Per property I formulated a number of questions that social evaluators and policy makers could pose themselves whenever they use my framework to assess the competitiveness of domains and practices.

Now that it is clear how my framework functions, I will apply it to and test it on one specific case. The example about the distribution of travel money within a philosophy department already gave a glimpse of the domain under investigation in the following chapter: Dutch academia. This will also be the final chapter before I conclude my dissertation.

# Chapter 7: Case Study: Dutch Academia

## 1. Introduction

In this chapter I apply my framework, as developed in the previous chapter, to a case study: competition in Dutch academia. I opted for this case study for three reasons. The first one is that the problems presented in chapters 4, 5 and 6 seem to occur in Dutch academia, so this is a good test case for my framework. The second reason is that there is quite some information publicly available which makes it easier to form a clear picture of how academia in the Netherlands is run and in which ways it can be considered ‘competitive’. A third, bonus reason is that most readers of this chapter will be academics themselves, so they will already be familiar with the way academia is run. And while I focus on the Dutch context specifically, many of the insights and conclusions from this chapter will also be relevant in contexts outside of the Netherlands. I focus specifically on early career academics, that is, PhD candidates, post-docs and teachers on temporary contracts, because the competition among them seems to be the fiercest, as they’re trying to get a permanent position in academia and gain job and financial stability.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> One might worry that my case study hits a bit too close to home, since I am one of these early career academics. There is the danger that I am biased in my normative judgement of how competitive academia is, since I am not merely a detached observer, but also a participant with stakes in the matter. Following Herzog and Zacka

The aim of this chapter is to *showcase the value of my framework* (as developed in chapter 6) by *applying* it to a concrete case: the early career stage in Dutch academia. To put it differently, I aim to show that and how my framework works as an evaluative tool in a domain where competition is already deemed problematic, but that largely lacks a systematic and nuanced account of why and *in which ways* the competition is problematic. As the Dutch action group WOinActie<sup>77</sup> states: the competitive funding of higher education and research has turned into a “hypercompetition that is inefficient” (WOinActie, n.d.-a). This (over)competitiveness is said to cause some of the core problems academia is currently facing, such as a structurally

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(2019), this danger is endemic to empirical research where the researcher has a long-term physical presence in the field (in my case, 5 years as a PhD researcher in the field of academia). To alleviate the risk of bias, I took a couple of measures. First, in line with Herzog and Zacka’s proposal to share “one’s findings with a community of scholars who can assess their verisimilitude, challenge one’s interpretations and complement one’s work” (Herzog & Zacka, 2019, p. 780), I discuss my findings with my supervisors, colleagues from the Competition and Competitiveness Project at the University of Essex and the members of the PhD committee. Second, to mitigate any bias I might have, I rely on a great number of empirical studies and other sources throughout this chapter. Whenever I make claims about academia’s competitiveness, I substantiate them by referring to other studies. In the social sciences and humanities more generally, this is often what research does, and it is a methodology that has been tried and tested.

<sup>77</sup> WOinActie is a movement that aims to protect the interests of university education and its link with scientific research, which, they argue, risk being compromised due to substantial long-term austerity measures and a fast increase in student numbers (WOinActie, n.d.-b).

high workload for academic staff. It is therefore important to scrutinise academia's competitiveness in a nuanced way and see where/how we can alleviate competitive pressures for the better. In short, again, this chapter is meant to showcase how my framework works in practice (and informs the reader about the current state of Dutch academia in the process).

The chapter proceeds as follows. Section 2 sketches a picture of academia's competitiveness in the Netherlands, including the incentive structures that are in place and the ways in which scarce resources, such as research and educational funding, are distributed. I will also indicate which factors determine the stakes and the scope in Dutch academia. Then, in section 3, I apply my framework, that is, I consider through the lens of psychological and emotional costs, opportunity costs, estrangement and corruption whether and how competition's problems manifest themselves in Dutch academia. Note, again, that this is a *case study*, not a full sociological study. This means that the (empirical) sources I refer to in section 3 are mostly meant to illustrate the value of my framework and give us a rough idea of how the different bad-making properties play out in practice. Finally, in section 4, I will evaluate a number of policy proposals and measures that are meant (amongst other things) to alleviate academia's competitiveness. By means of the aggravating properties of stakes and scope and the bad-making properties of corruption, psychological and emotional costs, opportunity costs and corruption I will provide a gradual and nuanced assessment of the desirability of these proposals and measures. Section 5 concludes.



## 2. A Sketch of Dutch Academia's Competitiveness

According to the Rathenau Instituut,<sup>78</sup> “[a]cademia is a competitive business” (Rathenau Instituut, 2022). Researchers evaluate one another’s contributions to respective fields of knowledge and are eager to be the first to publish a new insight or discovery. Academics also compete for grants and scholarships, publications in (top) journals and for the limited number of permanent positions at universities and research institutes.

In this section I sketch a picture of the different ways in which academia in the Netherlands is organised competitively. I start off with the money that the Dutch government invests in research and university education (subsection 2.1.). Then I move on to funding bodies and explain how individual grant allocation processes work. For illustrative purposes I focus particularly on the NWO (at the national level) and ERC (at the level of the European Union) (subsection 2.2.).<sup>79</sup> Finally, I will discuss the competitive academic job market (subsection 2.3.). To

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<sup>78</sup> The Rathenau Instituut researches the impact of science, innovation and technology on (the Dutch) society. Just like universities, the institute is an independent body but is largely funded by the Dutch government (Rathenau Instituut, n.d.).

<sup>79</sup> NWO is the acronym for *Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek*. The English translation is *Dutch Research Council*. ERC is the acronym for *European Research Council*. There are more grants academics in the Netherlands can apply for, such as KNAW and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowships. However, the ones mentioned provide sufficient information to show how the distribution of money generally works.

get an idea of Dutch academia's competitiveness, I pay particular attention to the scarce goods at play, success rates, the criteria being used, some reasons that have been put forward in favour of competition and some criticisms of competition. To conclude the section, I identify a number of factors that determine the stakes and scope of competition in Dutch academia (2.4.).

### *2.1. Government Funding*

In the Netherlands, almost 60% of the university funding comes directly from the national government. This is called 'the first flow of funds'. Each university receives this money in the form of a lumpsum, so they each can decide themselves how they want to distribute this amount among the faculties. In 2022 for instance, the total amount of government funding was €5.434 million. The government's contribution consists of four parts: education, research, medical education and medical research (Universiteiten van Nederland, n.d.-b). I will only focus on the first two.

The amount of funding that is designated for university *education* is determined by the total number of student registrations two years ago, which they call the 'T -2 method'. In 2022, this amount was €2.981 million. Then they subtract what they call the '*onderwijsopslag*', which is a fixed amount that is allocated to

universities and universities of applied sciences.<sup>80</sup> In 2022, *onderwijsopslag* comprised of €1.322 million. The amount of money that is left, €1.658 million, is then distributed amongst universities based on the *relative* number of student registrations and diplomas obtained by each university at time T (Universiteiten van Nederland, n.d.-b). So, if one university does not grow, while the others do, the first university gets fewer money.

It is therefore in the university's interest to attract more students (students who would have otherwise gone to a 'competing' university) and let them graduate in as little time as possible (Plag, 2019). This also provides universities with an incentive to attract ever more international students. Due to internationalisation, universities have grown, which in turn means they can ask for a relatively bigger share of the student-dependent funding from the national government (Been, Hekkema & Marée, 2019). Given that it is crucial for the university's survival to obtain a decent share of this variable funding, it *must* participate in this rat race for more and more students.

Looking through the lens of my framework, this is potentially a worrying development, as it intensifies the degree of competitiveness: the scarce good in question (funding) is distributed on the basis of a ranking (i.e. number of students and diploma's issued). What university *X* higher up the ranking receives goes at the cost of what university *Y*

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<sup>80</sup> The '*onderwijsopslag*' involves ministerial regulations that are determined based on quality, vulnerable studies and special provisions. See article 4.11. in Uitvoeringsbesluit WHW 2008.

lower down the ranking receives. The competition intensifies, because in order to get funding, each year, universities have to perform better than other universities, where the ‘performance’ refers to being able to attract ever more students and deliver ever more graduates. The *stakes* of not participating in this competition are high – that is, it becomes harder for a university to opt out – because not participating in this rat race means less money to keep the university up and running.

Moving on to *research*, in 2022, €2.262 million of money from the Dutch government was designated to research. The amount of research funding is partially distributed based on the number of diplomas and doctoral promotions a university brings forth. This funding is meant to finance basic services that allow academics to do research and excludes government money that is distributed through the NWO (more on the NWO below). However, while the total amount of funding for university education grows with the amount of student numbers (recall the T -2 method), the total amount of research money has remained more or less stable over the years. So, while there was a vast increase of student numbers over the years, the research money remained more or less the same. This means that the *total* government contribution per student has decreased, leading to increased financial pressure on universities (Universiteiten van Nederland, n.d.-b). The total contribution went from €20.168 per student in the year 2000 (with 168.093 students in total) to €14.369 per student in the year 2020 (with a total amount of no less than 327.300 students) (Universiteiten van Nederland, n.d.-a).

Given that universities obtain a large sum of money per promoted PhD candidate, universities are incentivised to attract more of them. Between the 2009 and 2017, this number was fixed: around €93.000 per promotion. But, given that the total amount of money allocated for research didn't rise, the proportion of the budget spent on promotions increased from 12% to 24%. In 2016, they therefore decided that a maximum of 20% of the total research budget was allowed to be spent on promotions, making this part of the budget zero-sum. This means that individual universities are inclined to deliver doctors to get a bigger share of that fixed-sum slice of the pie; however, the more doctors delivered, the lower the premium per promotion. In 2018, for example, this premium was lowered to €77.436 per promotion (Been, Marée & Hekkema, 2019).

Sometimes, universities try to maximise their 'output' in promotions for as little cost as possible to themselves. Taking on what is called '*buitenpromovendi*', for instance – doctoral students who are not employed by the university but fund their research project with their own means – is especially cost efficient, as universities only need to provide supervision and access to university facilities (PNN, 2019). This has led to dubious practices and even fraud, where the desire for money seemed stronger than the quality of research or the wellbeing of the PhD candidates. At Tilburg University, a whopping 77 people obtained their doctorate degree between 2010 and 2016 under the supervision of one full professor in Social Psychology. Cases are known where Tilburg University paid individual supervisors an exorbitant amount of money per promotion. One supervisor for

instance, received €30.000 per promotion. He spent this money, in total more than a million euro, on two businesses owned by his own family, one of which being a beauty salon (Argos, 2018). To be clear, the behaviours of professor in question are impermissible, also in a competitive system. However, such excesses are more likely to occur when competitive and financial incentives are in place that actively reward taking on (as many) PhD candidates (as possible).<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Similar incentives were at play in an experiment that took place from 2016 onwards, where a bursary system was introduced next to an already existing system where PhDs are hired as employees. Groningen University participated in the experiment and offered 1500 people a PhD *scholarship*. The motivation behind the experiment was to strengthen the international competitiveness of the Netherlands. To this end, it was deemed necessary to invest in the knowledge economy, which meant, according to the government's *Wetenschapsvisie 2025* (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2014, section 3.4), that the national labour market needed a bigger and more diverse offer of people with a PhD (Lommertzen et al., 2022, p. 5). In practice, the introduction of the scholarship system meant that a difference was being made between two types of PhDs who nevertheless do the same kind of work. Where employed PhDs build a pension, receive a holiday allowance, get a thirteenth month and have a salary that grows along with their work experience, bursary PhDs have the status of a student, miss out on many of the employment benefits and their scholarship does not grow along with their years of experience. In response to the final evaluation report and lots of protest, minister Dijkgraaf decided to abolish the experiment as of 2024 (ScienceGuide, 2022a). This is a prime example of how competition for external goods at higher levels (between universities and countries) can trickle down and worsen the situation of those at the bottom of the academic hierarchy (the PhDs).

Following a report from the European University Association, there are several arguments for distributing public money in a competitive, performance-based manner: “Performance-based funding is [...] often perceived as a useful tool by policy makers, both in order to connect funding to measurable [sic] indicators and thus increase the transparency of spending, as well as to incentivise and reward the achievement of certain policy goals” (Pruvot, Claeys-Kulik & Estermann, 2015, p. 11). Measurable output criteria include, as we have seen before, the number of graduates and the number of publications/citations (Pruvot, Claeys-Kulik & Estermann, 2015, p. 11).

In 2017, 43% of the total research capacity of Dutch universities came from the first flow of funds, 25% from the second flow of funds and 32% from the third flow of funds (Ministerie van Onderwijs Cultuur en Wetenschap, n.d.).<sup>82</sup> I turn to the second and third flow now.

## *2.2. NWO and ERC Funding*

The government does not only distribute research money through the first flow of funds, it also distributes money indirectly through what is called ‘the second flow of funds’. Funding bodies like the NWO manage this second flow of funds and distribute it on a competitive

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<sup>82</sup> There is no more data available on the division of the three flows of funds after 2017 (Ministerie van Onderwijs Cultuur en Wetenschap, n.d.).

(and often individual) basis among universities and research institutes. The NWO describes it as follows on their website:

NWO receives public money for science from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and from almost all the other government ministries, which is then distributed by means of competition to the universities and national research institutes. NWO manages this competitive research funding and ensures that the money reaches the best scientific talent and the best research proposals. (NWO, n.d.-e)

Following the Rathenau Instituut, grants can be a great promotor and indicator of excellence. They give winning researchers the resources to continue their research and explore new directions and they serve as an acknowledgement of the recipients' success in the field (Rathenau Instituut, 2022). The European University Association formulates several arguments in favour of competitive grant allocation schemes, the main argument being the fostering of excellence. Competitive procedures are said to ensure that research funding goes to the best researchers which are supposed to generate excellent research. Besides, such schemes are meant to encourage the strategic profiling of universities by motivating them to identify, strengthen and capitalise on their strengths as well as to increase the university or the country's competitiveness at the international stage (Pruvot, Claeys-Kulik & Estermann, 2015, p. 15). The current President of the Executive Board of the NWO, Marcel Levi is also a big proponent of competition in



academia and sees the potential sacrifices academics make as something positive:

De prijs van succes in zowel de wetenschap als topsport is hoog. In beide situaties zijn een forse investering in tijd, energie, inspanning, creativiteit en discipline noodzakelijk om uiteindelijk een succes en soms zelfs een plek op het podium te bereiken. Ondanks een soms niet gering [sic] zelfopoffering geven topsport én wetenschap de beoefenaar voldoende satisfactie [sic] en motivatie om toch weer enthousiast verder te gaan. (ScienceGuide, 2021)

Three prominent competitive funding schemes of the NWO are: Veni, for researchers who recently obtained their doctorate; Vidi, for experienced researchers; and Vici, for senior researchers.<sup>83</sup> They have success rates of around 14% (NWO, 2020), 16% (NWO, 2022c) and 11% (NWO, 2022a) respectively (see also: van Dijk, 2021). Individual applicants can get up to €280.000 for a Veni, €800.000 for a Vidi and up to €1.5 million for a Vici to pay for direct personnel, material costs and, in the case of the latter two, additional staff that needs to be recruited (NWO, n.d.-c). Most other NWO grants are also distributed

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<sup>83</sup> It is perhaps not a coincidence that some of the most prestigious grants from the NWO, Veni, Vidi, Vici, Latin for ‘I came, I saw, I conquered’, fits well within a competitive narrative where winning grants equals combat and victory.

competitively under the heading ‘Open Competition’ (what’s in a name).

The application procedure of the NWO goes as follows. First, the call for proposals goes out, which mentions the aim of the grant, eligibility criteria, the selection criteria, the size of the grant, how and when you can submit and when the NWO will reach a decision. The way the NWO allocates grant money quite literally follows my definition of competition:

Applications that were submitted during a given grant round are assessed and subsequently ranked according to predetermined criteria. The best applications end up highest in the rankings and are the first to be eligible for a grant. The grants are allocated according to these rankings, until the limit of the grant budget has been reached. (NWO, n.d.-a)

Before a selection committee looks into a proposal, the NWO first seeks the input from at least two external referees, who are independent advisors and experts in the field; their identities will not be disclosed to the applicants nor the selection committee. Once the NWO receives the referee reports, they will forward them to the applicant, who then has to respond to the reports in writing. This is called ‘the rebuttal’. In some cases, a site visit or interview is the next step in the application process. The goal of this step is to give the selection committee an impression of the managerial skills, research skills and the persuasiveness of the researcher(s). Once this process has finished, the

selection committee discusses each application, after which it gives a score on a scale from 1 to 9 and a corresponding qualification for each criterion (either ‘unsatisfactory’, ‘good’, ‘very good’ or ‘excellent’; more on the criteria in a moment). Then, all applications are ranked in order of the final weighted score. The committee advises the NWO to award the grants in this order until the total budget has been spent. Finally, the applicants receive a letter containing the committee’s assessment and the final decision (NWO, n.d.-a).

To illustrate, take the Call for Proposals for the NWO-Talent Programme Veni Social Sciences and Humanities (SGW) 2022, which follows the foregoing procedure literally. The total sum of money this grant distributes is €42.16 million. The call mentions that this amount is expected to be distributed among 147 applications, with a maximum of €280.000 per applicant.<sup>84</sup> The NWO Talent Programme aims to provide “creative opportunities for adventurous, talented, pioneering researchers to do research of their own choice and to encourage them to make a permanent career of academic research” (NWO, 2022b, p. 3). When a researcher meets certain eligibility criteria, the researcher can send in an application, consisting of a research proposal, motivation for the choice of institution, a section on societal and/or

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<sup>84</sup> At the moment of writing (June 29, 2023), I cannot find how many applicants eventually received the grant that corresponds to the 2022 call. However, there is data from the previous year. From the 1280 early career academics who applied for the 2021 round, eventually 167 won the grant, that is 22% (NWO, n.d.-d).

scientific impact, a narrative curriculum vitae, a paragraph on data management and a budget (NWO, 2022b, p. 7).

The proposals are assessed on (1) quality and innovative character of the research proposal (this counts for 40%); (2) scientific and/or societal impact (20%) and (3) the quality of the candidate (40%). Examples of criteria that fall under (1) are: “[c]hallenging content;” “originality” and “innovative scientific elements”. Examples of criteria that fall under (2) are: “potential and relevance of the research results for the wider scientific field;” “potential for societal impact in the short and long term;” and a “motivation for the focus on scientific and/or societal impact.” Examples of criteria that fall under (3) are: “qualities that clearly exceed what is customary within the international peer group;” “academic excellence as demonstrated by the PhD thesis, output or other scientific achievements”; “inspiring fascination for research and/or technology in general and for the execution of the research idea in particular;” “persuasiveness;” and “indications of collaborative abilities” (NWO, 2022b, pp. 18-19).

Finally, there is the third flow of funds; this comprises of funds from non- and for-profit organisations and local municipalities, such as provinces and municipalities. It also includes funding from the European Union, such as ERC grants (which is also government funding, but allocated indirectly through grants).<sup>85</sup> The total ERC

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<sup>85</sup> Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions is another important funding programme at the EU level. It focusses more specifically on doctoral education, postdoctoral training of researchers and staff exchanges, among other things (European Commission, n.d.).

budget over the period from 2021 to 2027 is more than €16 billion and is part of the Horizon Europe programme, an initiative from the European Union (European Research Council, n.d.-a). The most important ERC grants are Starting Grants (which go up to €1.5 million for a period of 5 years), Consolidation Grants (where winners can get up to €2 million for a period of 5 years), Advanced Grants (with €2.5 million for a period of 5 years) and finally, Synergy Grants, which are for groups of researchers from different fields (they can get a maximum of €10 million for a period of 6 years) (European Research Council, n.d.-b). ERC grants are highly competitive with an overall success rate of around 12% (European Research Council Magazine, 2019.).

With regards to the evaluation of the ERC grant proposals, applications are evaluated “on the basis of excellence as the sole criterion” (European Research Council, n.d.-b; European Research Council, 2020) and their proposals need to be high risk high gain (European Research Council Magazine, 2019.; European Research Council, 2020). Applicants are expected to include “a list of up to ten research outputs that demonstrate how they have advanced knowledge in their field, with an emphasis on more recent achievements, and a list of selected examples of significant peer recognition (for example, prizes)” (European Research Council, 2023).

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I will not go into this funding body here, since the explanations of NWO and ERC grants already provide a good picture of how the financing of research generally works.

When we look at academia more generally (so beyond the ERC), important research outputs to be considered in the selection process are publications. However, relying heavily on the number of publications and citations in well-respected journals when awarding scarce goods (e.g. funding) comes with an oft-lamented downside: an academic either *publishes* or *perishes* (Davies & Fellapi, 2017). This also heightens the stakes of the academic competition: an academic either manages to prove its (alleged) scientific worth by means of a set of quantifiable selection criteria or there is no career for this researcher in academia at all.

Moreover, the Rathenau Instituut observes that the competition for grants has intensified: “The necessity to distinguish yourself as an excellent scientist has increased in recent years, [...] because the need for personal funding has become more important, while the succes [sic] rate of getting a NWO grant has declined” (Rathenau Instituut, 2022). This ‘excellence policy’ only offers the ‘best’ candidates extra support and the capacity to get individual funding has become key in acquiring tenure in Dutch universities (Rathenau Instituut, 2022). To illustrate: in the period from the year 2000 to 2017, the percentage of the total research budget for universities<sup>86</sup> that comes from the first flow of funds dropped from 51,8% to 43,2%, while the second flow of funds

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<sup>86</sup> The total research capacity of universities in absolute terms went from 14586 fte in 2000 to 21067 fte in 2017. Due to changes in the methods of data collection, there is no more information available from after 2017 (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, n.d.).

went up from 20,6% to 25,2% between 2000 and 2017. The percentage coming from the third flow of funds rose from 27,6% in 2000 to 31,7% in 2017 (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2019). In line with my framework, this is an indication that the *stakes* have increased and the *scope* has broadened. Due to lower success rates, the ratio of winners to applicants has declined, while the importance of winning ever larger awards has risen, where the survival of the early career academic's career, financial and job stability and the possibility to continue doing research are at stake.

Let me illustrate the data from the previous paragraph, including how the stakes are experienced, with an anecdote from a Veni applicant. The applicant, specialised in the aerial dynamics of malaria mosquitos, didn't get the grant the first-time round: "A rejection like this could very well mean the end of your scientific career at a university. If you are not in permanent employment – [the applicant] was on a temporary postdoc contract – there are few sources of funding for you." For those who are starting out, a Veni is one of the few individual subsidies available. To apply for most of the others you need to have a permanent contract. But often, you only get an offer for a permanent position after receiving a Veni (van Dijk, 2021).

The phenomenon that the researcher is describing, where success or rejection early on in one's career can have a cumulative effect on one's career chances in the future, is called 'the Matthew effect' in the literature: "Scientists who have previously been successful are more likely to succeed again, producing increasing distinction" (Bol, De Vaan & Van de Rijt, 2018, p. 4887). Put

differently, if only one of two equally capable young academics is given an award, the award-winner will have a more successful career because of the resource and status advantages the winner enjoys over the non-winner. It sets in motion a cumulative advantage process that increases inequality (Bol, De Vaan & Van de Rijt, 2018). Moreover, these resource advantages help winners to *actually* become better at their job, resources that the ‘losers’ do not have access to, or to a lesser extent. Take experience as a PhD supervisor. Often, one can only gain this experience in the context of a grant, where one gets the opportunity to hire PhDs on the project. This experience, in turn, gives the current winner a competitive advantage in the next grant competition, where supervision experience is one of the requirements.

Bol, De Vaan and Van de Rijt (2018) studied the Matthew effect in Dutch academia. They compared the success rates of obtaining an NWO Vidi grant between those who only just won an NWO Veni earlier in their career and those who didn’t win an NWO Veni, but who were only just below the threshold. First, they found that those who won an early career grant by the smallest margin were around 2.5 times more likely to win a mid-career grant, than those who fell just short of winning that earlier grant, while the research proposals of the winners were not necessarily superior. Second, they found that after four years, the lowest ranked winners have received around €40.000 more in research funding than the best non-winners. After eight years, this difference grew to €180.000. Third, winning an early career award raises the long-term prospects of becoming a full professor by 47%. Finally, those who were successful at past competitions are more likely



to apply for future competitions again, while unsuccessful candidates apply for another grant less often, thereby exacerbating the inequalities in research success (Bol, De Vaan & Van de Rijt, 2018). Small differences in one's position on the ranking can thus create big differences in opportunities and outcomes in the longer run due to the fact that the goods distributed in these competitions (a grant, a prize) have an all or nothing character: winners get a full grant, while losers get nothing and there is nothing in between.

In recent years, there is an increased awareness among funding bodies that academia has become too competitive. For example, NWO's Strategy 2023-2026 document expresses its responsibility as a funding body to diminish hypercompetition (such a high level of competition for grants that it becomes unhealthy) and the Matthew effect (NWO, 2022d, p. 25). Moreover, the NWO and the ERC both signed the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) (NWO, n.d.-b; NFFA.eu, 2021).

DORA is a response to the concern that, when evaluating funding applications, too much emphasis is put on comparing overly narrow and (partially) inaccurate quantifiable metrics such as Journal Impact Factors and the H-index.<sup>87</sup> One came to the realisation that the

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<sup>87</sup> The impact factor of a journal refers to the average amount of citations that publications in that journal brought about over the last couple of years. The higher the value, the more prestigious the journal is (University of Amsterdam, n.d.), the better it is for a researcher to publish in it. The H-index or Hirsch-index (after the researcher who introduced it in 2005), provides “an estimate of the importance, significance, and broad impact of a scientist's cumulative research contributions”

almost exclusive focus on these metrics does not do justice to one's actual research qualities; a paper should not be based on the journal it was published in but on its own merits. In line with DORA's recommendations, therefore, the NWO has taken several actions already. For example, it is explicitly forbidden to mention metrics such as the Journal Impact Factors and the H-index in the calls and the applications. Moreover, applicants need to write a narrative CV instead of a CV where all the publications are listed (NWO, n.d.-b). I will evaluate this measure by means of my framework below, in section 4.

### 2.3. Academic Jobs

The government and project funding mentioned above is largely used to create and maintain academic jobs, which is another good that is distributed competitively in academia. Jobs are usually expressed in fte's (full-time equivalent), where 1 fte refers to one full time position. A report from the Rathenau Instituut, *Tijdelijke contracten bij universiteiten in perspectief* (2023), provides some interesting insights regarding the Dutch situation. In the Netherlands, universities make use of a mix of temporary and permanent contracts. Thanks to temporary

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(Hirsch, 2005, p. 16572). It takes the number of papers published by a researcher and the number of citations per published paper and applies the following calculation: number of papers ( $h$ ) that have received at least  $h$  citations. The higher the  $h$  the more impact the researcher (arguably) has (Bernard Becker Medical Library, 2022), because it means that an academic has published many papers with at least as many citations.

contracts, universities are better able to adapt to (financial) changes. The downsides, however, are financial and job insecurities for the employees in question, which can affect their mental wellbeing. Temporary contracts can also undermine the innovative power of organisations (Rathenau Instituut, 2023) due to the lack of autonomy experienced by employees as a result of flexibilisation on the labour market (Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, 2020, p. 109).

In 2021, 43% of university staff in the Netherlands (including PhDs) has a temporary contract. If we exclude PhDs from the calculation, then 30% of the university staff has such a contract. This is higher than the national average, where 23% of Dutch employed workers across all professions have a temporary contract (Rathenau Instituut, 2023). This is also higher than the European average. When we compare the percentage of temporary staff in the phase directly after promotion,<sup>88</sup> the Netherlands scores higher (i.e. worse) than other European countries, with 78% compared to an EU-28 average of 50% in 2016 (Rathenau Instituut, 2023).

In general, the higher the position in the academic hierarchy, the lower the percentage of temporary contracts. And while the number of PhDs and post-docs has risen, the number of more senior (often times tenured) positions has remained scarce, which means that the former are under more pressure to stand out in comparison to their

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<sup>88</sup> Phase after promotion is understood as “Post-Doctoral or equivalent”, compared to “Established Researcher” and “Leading Researcher” (Rathenau Instituut, 2023).

peers to advance in their careers (Rathenau Instituut, 2023). Moreover, given that universities need to stay competitive in an environment where government funding is scarce, it is in their interest to keep a flexible ‘shell’ of temporary labour, who, in turn, are required to stay in a permanent state of competition where they constantly have to prove themselves in comparison to others. The number of precarious, temporary positions can thereby also be an indicator of academia’s competitiveness; the scope gets wider the more widespread temporary contacts are and the stakes get higher the more precarious these positions are.

Following Ingrid Robeyns (Plag, 2019), given that academics are often intrinsically motivated to work on their research topic and provide education, they are much more inclined to keep trying to get that next position, instead of finding another job outside of academia. Compare this with Thijs Lijster’s observation: the romantic idea of the artist as an outcast and a vanguard nowadays serves as a model for the ideal worker, that is, a capitalist caricature of the bohemian artist who lives for one’s work, does not have a 9 to 5 mentality, whose world is one’s office and who lives from project to project. Even jobs that are not necessarily artistic are infected by this work ethic of flexibility, creativity and (alleged) autonomy (Lijster, 2022). This image is also present in academic philosophy, where papers about topics the author is intrinsically interested in, can be written wherever – in the train, in café’s, in a parc – and whenever one has inspiration – even in the weekend and in the evenings. A system with many temporary contracts that keeps academics in permanent competition with each other takes

advantage of the intrinsic motivation academics have for their job. Their intrinsic motivation makes them vulnerable, since academics will do the work anyway, even in precarious employment.

The Rathenau Instituut mentions, however, that a majority of the PhDs does not manage to find a permanent position within academia. The average age for finishing a PhD in the Netherlands is 29.5 years, but those who continue in academia are around 37 before they get a (permanent) position as an assistant professor. For many people, there is a lot going on in this phase of life, as this is often the age one wants to settle down and/or start a family (Rathenau Instituut, 2023).

The debate on (the competition for) temporary contracts has flared up in recent years. Since 2017 we see a slight decline in temporary contracts, which could be the result of the *Wet werk en zekerheid* and collective labour agreements, both from 2015, where it was agreed that the total percentage of temporary contracts should not exceed 22%, counting teachers, assistant professors, associate professors and full professors (excluding PhDs and post-docs). In 2020 and 2021, however, the number of temporary contracts was on the rise again. Overall, the number of permanent positions grew by 22% between 2005 and 2021, but the number of temporary positions grew by 80% (Rathenau Instituut, 2023). This indicates an increase in competition: there is more competition for all these temporary jobs with rankings being made over and over again.

Collective labour agreements from 2021-2022 made further plans to realise more permanent jobs, but again, while the number of

permanent contracts indeed increases, the number of temporary contracts seem to increase quicker (Rathenau Instituut, 2023). Paradoxically, therefore, one's efforts to reduce competition in Dutch academia by realising more permanent contracts goes hand in hand with more temporary jobs and therefore more competition. In a parliamentary paper from the 14<sup>th</sup> of October 2022, the current minister of Education, Culture and Science [*Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap*], Robbert Dijkgraaf, mentions that the number of temporary jobs hasn't decreased in 2021, but he adds that the effects of the latest labour union agreements, promising more fixed-term contracts, are not yet visible in the stats (Rijksoverheid, 2022, question 9).

#### *2.4. Stakes and Scope*

In the foregoing I showed how funding and subsequent jobs are competitively distributed in Dutch academia: I showed how vital, scarce goods are distributed on the basis of participants' relative performances. Winners get access to resources and opportunities while the losers do not get anything or as much. Let me now summarise some important factors that determine the size of the stakes and the width of the scope of these competitions.

Factors that determine the *stakes* of competitions in Dutch academia:

- the success rates of competitions for grants and jobs (low success rates can be an indicator of high stakes, especially in combination with the following points);
- the size of the losses for the ‘losers’, such as the (continued) lack of access to resources and financial/job insecurity (the bigger the losses, the higher the stakes and the more morally problematic the competition is);
- the size of the rewards – such as grant money, job security and status – for the winners (high rewards are an indicator of high stakes, especially in combination with the following point);
- the strength of the Matthew effect, referring to the accumulated inequality between ‘successful’ and ‘unsuccessful’ academics and the extent to which these inequalities are reinforced merely due to the fact that one did or did not get an early career grant (the stronger the Matthew effect, the higher the stakes of winning a significant competition early in your career); and
- the difficulty of opting out of competitions in academia, that is, the extent to which deciding not to compete is fatal (think for instance, of the universities who have to participate in the rat race for more international students, otherwise they don’t get as much government funding).

Factors that determine the *scope* of competitions in Dutch academia:

- the number of aspects of academia that do *not* involve competing against others, that is, the room there is left for people/universities to be free from comparative judgements (the fewer of these non-competitive aspects there are, the wider the scope); and
- the different levels at which competition takes place: between countries, between universities and between individuals (the more multi-level competitions are, and the more competition trickles down different levels, the wider the scope).

In the next section I will apply my framework to assess how the different bad-making properties of competition – psychological and emotional costs, opportunity costs, estrangement and corruption – play out in practice in Dutch academia. Then, in section 4, I will evaluate some existing initiatives that have been taken to lower the stakes, narrow the scope and thereby make Dutch academia less competitive.

### **3. Application of the Framework**

In this section I will refer to some (empirical) sources to illustrate that psychological and emotional costs (3.1.), opportunity costs (3.2.), estrangement (3.3.) and corruption (3.4.) indeed occur in Dutch academia, arguably even in problematic ways. Note, however, that this is a case study, not a full sociological analysis. My aim here is to demonstrate how my framework is used in practice.



### *3.1. Psychological and Emotional Costs*

In chapter 5, it was argued that (substantially engulfing) competitions pose social evaluative threats and tend to inflict psychological and emotional costs on the participants which include feelings of not being ‘good enough’, a loss of self-confidence, a diminished sense of self-worth or self-esteem, but also stress and mental health problems. In which ways do competition-related psychological and emotional costs manifest themselves among early career academics in the Netherlands? What does the empirical literature say?<sup>89</sup>

Starting off with a study on the wellbeing of philosophy PhDs in the Netherlands. The PhD council of the OZSW<sup>90</sup> took the initiative, in collaboration with Els van Rooij from the University of Groningen, to investigate the wellbeing of this group of PhDs. The study was conducted in 2019 and 88 people filled in the questionnaire. The results were concerning: 58% of the respondents run the risk of developing a mental health disorder, which means that a majority of respondents experiences mental health symptoms that interfere with their daily life.<sup>91</sup> The most common symptoms are: feeling under constant strain

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<sup>89</sup> To be extra careful, I will only refer to empirical sources that explicitly link psychological and emotional problems to competition. Data about early career academics who suffer from stress, burnout and/or other mental health issues might not in themselves provide enough evidence for a correlation with competition.

<sup>90</sup> The OZSW is the Dutch acronym for the Dutch Research School of Philosophy.

<sup>91</sup> For van Rooij’s study, the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) was used, which is a screening device to detect psychological distress and the risk of a common mental

(57%); not being able to concentrate at work (56%); not being able to enjoy normal day-to-day activities (51%); losing confidence in yourself (48%); and losing sleep over worry (48%). When asked which aspects of doing a PhD negatively affect mental health, 50% of the respondents mentioned insecurities about future career, 47% mentioned insecurities about one's own capabilities, 38% said publication pressure, 36% indicated not achieving good results or doubts about achieving good results and 33% mentioned high level of competition in academia.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, 83% of the participating philosophy PhDs in the Netherlands are sometimes, often or always worried about their career (50% even often or always). The two most common reasons for why the respondents are worried about their career are the high competition to obtain the job they want (55% indicated this) and being unsure whether they're good enough for these jobs (43%) (Drissen, 2020). Especially these last findings are telling, where the worries about career

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health disorder (such as depression). By means of different questions, the survey measures to what extent respondents have experienced twelve symptoms in the last couple of weeks. When respondents experienced four or more symptoms more than usual in the last couple of weeks, they run a heightened risk of developing a mental health disorder, most notably a depression (Drissen, 2020). The survey is not meant to make diagnoses (Leveque, De Beuckelaer & Mortier, 2019, p. 2). The studies from van der Weijden et al. (2017) and Leveque, De Beuckelaer and Mortier (2019) listed in the paragraphs below also employ this method.

<sup>92</sup> The numbers in this sentence are not mentioned in the source I am referring to. For access to the raw data, do not hesitate to send an email to [y.m.drissen@tilburguniversity.edu](mailto:y.m.drissen@tilburguniversity.edu).

are explicitly linked to competition and the feeling of not being good enough.

Earlier research on the wellbeing among early career academics in the Netherlands more generally comes with similar results. A 2017 research report about the mental wellbeing of doctoral candidates at Leiden University shows that 38,3% of the PhDs in Leiden runs the risk of developing serious mental health problems. Of the respondents, 46,8% indicated that they experience constant tension and pressure. After providing some recommendations to improve the wellbeing of doctoral candidates (e.g. by appointing a PhD psychologist), the report concluded that without critical reflection on the competitive and individualistic academic culture, the recommendations will not result in concrete changes (van der Weijden et al., 2017). So the researchers explicitly refer to the competitive academic culture as a crucial factor that correlates with mental health issues among PhDs, such as constant tension and pressure.

To compare, finally, in Flanders (the Northern part of Belgium), the numbers are similar to the ones in the Netherlands. Studies from 2013 and 2018 amongst Flemish doctoral candidates show a slight increase in the percentage of PhDs experiencing mental health problems, from 31,8% in 2013 to 35,4% in 2018. This is 1.8 to 2.8 times higher than other highly educated people in Flanders, who work in different fields. The most common symptom amongst PhD candidates is the experience of constant tension and pressure: in 2013, 40,8% experienced this and in 2018, 43,6%. The researchers recognise that the pressure to publish, limited chances to get promoted, job

insecurity and competition are part of the (international) *discourse* about mental health problems amongst academics, but they refrain from making normative claims themselves (Leveque, De Beuckelaer & Mortier, 2019).

Based on this snapshot of the empirical research on the mental health and wellbeing of early career academics in the Netherlands, it seems plausible that competition plays a role in this. Yet before considering potential alternatives to the current ways in which academia in the Netherlands is organised competitively (in section 4), I will first move on to what extent and in which ways competition impacts the other three bad-making properties of competition: opportunity costs (3.2.), estrangement (3.3.) and corruption (3.4.).

### *3.2. Opportunity Costs*

In chapter 5, I argued that competition leads to opportunity costs amongst the participants. In academia, opportunity costs are most prevalent and salient in the distribution of grants. The selection procedure typically takes lots of time for the applicants (who have to write the proposal), the reviewers (who have to read, compare and select all the proposals) and the funding body (who organises the competition). The opportunity costs here mostly consist of the time and effort that applicants and peer-reviewers could instead have spent on doing research (or other things).

By means of a mathematical model, Gross and Bergstrom argued that the opportunity costs grow bigger as the acceptance rate

drops. The study's "major result is that proposal competitions are inevitably and inescapably inefficient mechanisms for funding science when the number of awards is smaller than the number of meritorious projects" (Gross & Bergstrom, 2019, pp. 9-10). As the number of awards drops, the competition intensifies, they argue. The applicants either have to work harder while their chance of getting the funding remains the same or the applicants work just as hard as they would have otherwise while their chance of winning decreases (Gross & Bergstrom, 2019, p. 10).

On top of this, "adding extrascientific motivation will increase the effort that investigators devote to preparing grant proposals. However, [...] this extra effort has no extra bearing on which grants are funded" (Gross & Bergstrom, 2019, p. 9). So, the addition of greater extra-scientific rewards, such as prestige and status, will motivate candidates to work harder on their proposal, while this doesn't lead to bigger returns of investments, because the number of awards remains limited.

While Gross and Bergstrom (2019) show that, in theory, the opportunity costs increase as the number of awards drops, it is hard to find *actual* estimations of the number of hours spent, let alone wasted, on writing and reviewing proposals in the Netherlands and even beyond. There is some evidence though that gives us a rough idea.

A 2013 study about Australia's grant system shows how much time researchers spent on applying for the National Health and Medical Research Council in 2012, preparing proposals of each 80 to 120 pages long. The survey found that applicants took on average 38 workings

days on a proposal; resubmitted ones took on average 28 days. With 3.727 submissions in total, the estimated number of working years amounted to 550, or over five centuries. Given that 20,5% of the applications were successful, around four centuries of work returned no immediate benefit. That is four centuries of time wasted (Herbert, Barnett & Graves, 2013). Again, this doesn't even include the time spent reviewing and assessing those proposals.

In Flanders, a group called *Denkgroep Optimale verdeling Onderzoeksmiddelen* from the University of Leuven estimated that scientists of their own university spend between 68 and 130 hours (i.e. between 1,7 and 3,25 working weeks) per year on applications for *internal* funding (Denkgroep Optimale verdeling Onderzoeksmiddelen, 2020). And a study by *EOS wetenschap* among 271 Flemish professors shows that they spend on average 409 hours (i.e. 10 working weeks) per year on applying for (internal and external) funding (De Cleene, 2017), excluding time spent on peer reviewing and administrative cost. That seems like a lot, but is it too much? That depends on the success rates of the grant competitions. Conix and De Block argue that for success rates of as low as 20%, the opportunity costs for those who didn't make it outweigh the gains of those who won the grant (2020). This would mean that most of the competitive grants mentioned above – with acceptance rates of around 12% for ERC grants, 14% for Veni's, 16% for Vidi's and 11% for Vici grants – result in a net waste of time.

Two types of opportunity costs are implicit in the cited papers above and are important to point out: (a) the costs to the *individual*

*researcher's* career; and (b) the costs to the *scientific discipline* as a whole.

Regarding (a), the losers (or non-grant winners) experience a double setback: investments in time and effort didn't pay off (so no gains, which is the first setback), while time and effort could have been spent on research, including writing and publishing papers, which is also crucial to the advancement of one's career (which is the second setback). Moreover, with the standard of what is deemed 'excellent' continuously rising due to the rat race academics are in, applicants all have to invest even more resources into their application compared to before, losers and winners alike.

Regarding (b), the number of hours applicants spent on writing the proposal are hours not spent on doing research. This means that the scientific discipline didn't move forward as much as it could have, were that time and effort spent on actually doing research. So, the harm – that is, the setback to interests – consists in science not moving forward as much as it could have.

While more empirical research is needed to get a full understanding of the opportunity costs involved in (Dutch) academia, the limited research available suggests that these costs are substantial.

### 3.3. *Estrangement*

In the context of Dutch academia, the bad-making property of estrangement can occur at an inter-institutional level and at an inter-personal level. To illustrate the first, I focus specifically on whether the

competition between universities for ever more (international) students leads to estrangement and strategic behaviours. With regards to the second, I focus on signs of estrangement between academics in a publish-or-perish environment.

### *Estrangement at the Inter-Institutional Level*

With regards to estrangement at the inter-institutional level, I focus particularly on the competition between universities for students to get a larger part of the educational funding from the government. Recently, a few policy changes have been implemented with the aim of diminishing institutional competition. Let's look at this development through the lens of estrangement.

Over the years, the percentage of variable funding for universities – that is, the competitive funding based on *relative* student numbers – increased (Marée, Been & Hekkema, 2019). In 2011, 40% of the funding was fixed and 60% was variable, but by 2019, the percentage of fixed funding dropped to 26% and the percentage variable funding rose to 74% (de Zwart, Berkhout, Das & van den Berg, 2021, p. 7). This can be regarded as an increase in competitiveness, since universities are incentivised to attract ever more students (also outside of the Netherlands) just to get a relatively bigger share of the fixed-sum variable part. According to student interest groups ISO and LSVb, a large student-dependent part of the educational budget is a perverse incentive that leads to strategic interactions between universities in terms of marketing and efforts to attract (international) students. The student representatives also indicated that the



competition impedes universities from collaborating (de Zwart, Berkhout, Das & van den Berg, 2021, p. 29).<sup>93</sup> Arguably then, the government gives universities strong reasons to mutually ‘disregard’ one another and engage in strategic behaviours. The competition for international students estranged the universities from one another.

In 2020, in response to a worrying report from the Commissie-Van Rijn stating that the competition for ever more students got out of hand, the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science brought the percentage of variable government funding back to the levels of 2011, from 74% down to 59% and the fixed percentage went up from 26% to 41% (de Zwart, Berkhout, Das & van den Berg, 2021, pp. 13-15).

### *Estrangement at the Inter-Personal Level*

I couldn’t find much systematic research or other evidence pointing towards competition induced estrangement amongst (early career) academics. The one source I could find – a book called ‘*Goed werk voor academici*’ (2016) – suggests levels of estrangement do occur in

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<sup>93</sup> The *Vereniging Samenwerkende Nederlandse Universiteiten* (VSNU) dropped the word ‘samenwerkende’ [collaborative] from its name in 2016 (Marée, Been & Hekkema, 2019). The association that represents 14 public universities, is now called *Universiteiten van Nederland* (Universiteiten van Nederland, n.d.-c), a source I referred to regularly in section 2. Following Marée, Been and Hekkema, the change of name is illustrative of the most important development in higher education in the last thirty years: universities don’t collaborate anymore but became competitors. “*Ze vechten elkaar de tent uit*” (2019).

Dutch academia. The authors of the book report that 73% of the participants responded negatively to the question whether they see peers within their own institution as competitors, that is, 73% does *not* see their own colleagues as competitors. For peers at other institutions, 56% doesn't see them as competitors (van den Brink, Scholten & Janssen, 2016, pp. 15, 215).

Moreover, the authors argue that the different forms of rivalry in academia go at the cost of collaboration, collegiality and community building, and should therefore be mitigated (van den Brink, Scholten & Janssen, 2016, pp. 7, 23-24). The authors mention a number of behaviours that indicate strategic behaviours amongst academics. For example, they report a lack of willingness to help colleagues or contribute to the department, because these efforts will not help academics on the competitive labour market (van den Brink, Scholten & Janssen, 2016, p. 81). Academics also divide the results of their research into separate papers, such that they can have more publications, and therefore, 'score' better in job or grant applications. Or they form a cartel of authors who frequently cite each other's work to bump up their impact factor. So, following the authors, while the use of quantitative measures (such as impact factors) can make the selection of candidates more efficient, it also rewards strategic behaviours of academic professionals (van den Brink, Scholten & Janssen, 2016, pp. 14-15). And, as we have seen, strategic interaction amongst competitors is an indicator of estrangement, since one consciously tries to anticipate on the (measurable) behaviours of competitors in order to perform (i.e., score) better in turn.

The foregoing gives us an idea of how the bad-making property of estrangement can play out in competitions at inter-institutional and inter-personal levels. Again, I am not in the position to say anything conclusive about the degree of estrangement in Dutch academia, but the sources just mentioned do suggest that some degree of estrangement occurs.

### *3.4. Corruption*

We arrived at the final bad-making property, corruption, which concerns the extent to which competition crowds out internal goods, virtues, norms and values that are deemed appropriate to the practice.

In 2020, the Rathenau Instituut sent a note to the Dutch Parliament with the message that universities should focus less on money and competition and should better protect their public core tasks, which are, according to the institute: good education, good research and the utilisation of knowledge. To stop the rat race between academics, the Institute notes, universities should shift their focus from numbers of publications to serving the public interest and adding societal value. Funding schemes – which are an important way of steering people’s behaviours in a particular direction by incentivising the development of certain skills and attitudes over others – should focus more on fostering collaboration between individuals, disciplines, universities, governments, companies and other organisations (Rathenau Instituut, 2020b).

It becomes clear from this note that the Rathenau Instituut is worried that competition crowds out something that it deems the ‘core tasks of universities’. While the details of these core tasks are (and should always be) under discussion, it is not controversial to claim that something valuable gets lost when we focus too much on trying to competitively acquire money and other external goods. The institute recognises that collaboration is required to execute these ‘core tasks’ and that competition (for external goods) achieves the exact opposite by pitting people against each other. The domain of academia is arguably corrupted when academics focus mostly on publishing as much as possible rather than serving the public interest and adding societal value in an honest, transparent and truthful manner, which are deemed ‘internal’ to academia.

#### **4. Assessing Alternative Policy Proposals**

Until now, I’ve made a sketch of the ways scarce, desirable goods are distributed competitively in Dutch academia and listed which factors determine the stakes and the scope of these competitions (section 2). I thereby focussed particularly on early career academics, who compete for grants and jobs that provide them with the security to continue doing their research, job security and financial security. I also referred to a number of quotes from those who claim that the way that competition is currently organised in Dutch academia is destructive, such as the Commissie-Van Rijn (2019), the NWO (2022d, p. 25), the Rathenau Instituut (2020a; 2022; 2023) and WOinActie (n.d.-a). I have

also shown how my framework can be applied by evaluating how each bad-making property plays out in the academic practice. Based on the various (empirical) sources I referred to in section 3, it seems that worrying degrees of psychological and emotional costs, opportunity costs, estrangement and corruption occur in Dutch academia.

Assuming that competition indeed leads to serious problems, this section aims to demonstrate the added value of my framework by evaluating several policy proposals and measures meant to decrease academia's competitiveness. My goal here is not to evaluate all the policy proposals and measures out there, but rather to illustrate how my framework could be used as an evaluative tool. I focus on two such policy proposals/policies in particular: (1) the proposal to allocate individual grants on a non-competitive basis and (2) the policies meant to make room for a more holistic way of evaluating talent (beyond narrow metrics), such as DORA and Rewards & Recognition.

#### *4.1. Allocate Individual Grants on a Non-competitive Basis: Lottery and Basic Funding*

Proposals have been made to distribute individual grants on a non-competitive basis, such as lotteries (Gross & Bergstrom, 2019; Conix & De Block, 2020) and basic funding (Conix & De Block, 2020). An important argument that has been offered against the competitive allocation of research funding is that it leads to substantial waste, i.e., opportunity costs. Conix and De Block (2020) even provocatively ask whether burning part of the research money would be equivalent to

distributing it competitively, where academics evaluate each other's work by means of a costly peer-review system.

My framework helps to shed some light on the proposal to replace the competitive peer-review allocation system by a non-competitive lottery system or even basic funding. It is indeed right that a lottery and basic funding would vastly reduce the opportunity costs, which is one of the bad-making properties in my framework. Given that it is typical for competitions that participants are incentivised to invest time, money and effort into improving one's chances of winning, replacing it with a lottery or basic funding, where relative performances don't matter (as much), would save lots of time, money and effort. Moreover, a lottery or basic funding would not require a whole peer-review system, where other academics are tasked with evaluating, comparing and ranking proposals. Instead, proposals are picked at random or everyone gets a minimum budget.

However, research money is always going to be scarce – there is only an  $X$ -amount of money available each year – so distributing the money among all grant applicants equally (or amongst all those who want to do research in an academic setting, for that matter) might not be feasible. Given the divisibility of money, the stakes can already be lowered by allocating smaller sums of research money among more applicants (thereby also increasing the success rates and limiting the prestige and status connected to winning). Yet, the real question remains, which is how to deal with scarcity while fostering a healthy academic environment.

By distributing the money by means of a pure lottery, in turn, the grants partially lose their prestige and status (which Gross and Bergstrom called ‘extra-scientific rewards’). As we have seen in chapter 2, competition creates the scarce status of ‘winner’ or ‘top researchers’, with the status and prestige that comes with it. Opting for non-competitive allocation procedures like a lottery would therefore lower the stakes, as it takes away (part of) the (extra-scientific) rewards. ‘Winners’ of a lottery still get (part of) the grand, but they don’t have reasons to feel smug about it. And those who miss out don’t have reasons to feel inferior with regards to their research qualities (cf. psychological and emotional costs: it doesn’t pose social evaluative threats).

However, the strength of my framework is that it allows for competition to be gradual, rather than all or nothing. While a full lottery system reduces most of the opportunity costs, we also miss out on an important quality check, where basically anyone who applies for the grant can get it, regardless of the strength of their proposal. We might want to keep the performance aspect (which is also essential to competition) to make sure that the proposals meet certain standards of excellence, but distribute the grant money randomly among those who meet the minimum performance threshold (taking away the incentive

to go above and beyond what is needed to write a good proposal, which saves up time that can be spent on other things).<sup>94</sup>

Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences (TSHD) already experimented with such a partial lottery. They decided to distribute €100.000 of internal money randomly among those who met a minimum threshold. For instance, one of the minimal requirements was that the applicant collaborates with a scientist from another faculty. They distribute relatively small amounts of money (€5.000 up to €20.000) and the acceptance rates are high. Those who need less money to execute their research plan get a higher chance of winning than those who need more money. One of the reasons TSHD opted for a lottery, is because it wanted to curb the competitive climate in academia (ScienceGuide, 2022b).

This partial lottery system wouldn't push the opportunity costs to zero, because applicants still need to write up a quality research proposal. Moreover, the peer-reviewers and selection committee still need to evaluate whether the research proposals meet the minimum threshold. However, it still saves time compared to the fully competitive allocation mechanism, where applicants are incentivised to engage in the time-consuming task of continuously trying to outperform others. Moreover, it also saves the peer-reviewers time, since they merely need to see if the applicant checks certain boxes,

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<sup>94</sup> This recommendation is similar to Damian Cox' proposal to eliminate grading of student work in university education and replace grading systems with a system of demanding pass/fail assessments (Cox, 2019).



rather than making a time intensive ranking among proposals who are roughly the same quality. In this partial lottery system with a minimum threshold, the opportunity costs can be justified because it benefits the quality of the proposals.

One might argue, however, that a partial lottery is too random. The best way of fostering excellence is by *only* awarding the very best applicants with grants, or so one might think. So, an allocation procedure should succeed in identifying and rewarding applicants at the absolute top, and the only way to do this is in a competitive manner.

However, it is an illusion to think that a fully competitive allocation procedure aimed at only selecting the absolute top does not involve randomness at all. When a selection needs to be made between several meritorious, high-value projects, research shows that the cut-off between the ones that *just* made it and those who *just failed* to make it is largely arbitrary or biased<sup>95</sup> and disproportionately benefits researchers that obtained a grant early on in their career (due to the Matthew effect, as we've seen in section 2).

To prevent biases, one might engage in efforts to decrease randomness, for instance by making the selection criteria more precise and fool proof (for instance, by providing a more detailed description of what is meant by 'ground-breaking research' and engaging in blind

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<sup>95</sup> When making a selection, there is a preference for conservative rather than novel ideas (Conix, De Block & Vaesen, 2021). Moreover, funding decisions depend on the opinions and preferences of the experts who happen to be in the panel and are influenced by whether the applicant are in the panellists' network (Conix & De Block, 2020).

peer reviewing). I fully support making the competitive selection criteria as clear and bias-free as possible. However, the bad-making properties of corruption and estrangement teach us that excellence and the realisation of internal goods are best served in a *cooperative* rather than a competitive manner. As we have seen in chapters 4, 5 and 6, competition literally pits the wills of people against each other by design and estranges them, while cooperation is needed to realise internal goods and achieve (academic) excellence. So, trying to foster excellence by keeping the allocation procedure as competitive as before, but with better-defined selection criteria is morally problematic, as it will have the opposite effect: it hampers the realisation of internal goods, and therefore the achievement of excellence. Following my framework, quality and excellence would best be served by toning down the competitiveness (and arguably install a partial lottery instead).

This is the kind of analysis that I have in mind when applying my framework to an actual domain or practice. I took a policy proposal to replace competitive grant allocation procedures with lotteries and basic funding to avoid the waste; my framework allowed me to assess in a gradual and nuanced way the merits of this proposal, rather than in an all-or-nothing way. Through the lens of the different aggravating and bad-making properties, we gain a valuable insight into the competitiveness of domains and practices. Before finishing this chapter, let me illustrate the application of my framework one more time by considering another set of policies: DORA and Rewards & Recognition.

#### *4.2. Make Room for a Holistic Way of Evaluating Talent (Beyond Narrow Metrics)*

In section 2 I referred to the NWO's commitment to the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA). DORA is an attempt to move away from the reliance on overly narrow and (partially) inaccurate quantifiable metrics such as the Journal Impact Factor (JIF) and the H-index and adopt a more holistic approach to academic excellence. When applying for an NWO grant, for instance, it is explicitly forbidden to mention these metrics and applicants have to write a narrative CV instead.

DORA is in line with a broader development in (Dutch) academia that aims to make room for everyone's talent. In November 2019, *Universiteiten van Nederland*, the Netherlands Federation of University Medical Centres (NFU), the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), the Dutch Research Council (NWO) and the Netherlands Organisation for Health Research and Development (ZonMw), with support from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, published a position paper called 'Room for everyone's talent: towards a new balance in the recognition and rewards of academics.' The paper expresses the aim to recognise and reward the work of academics more broadly than the narrow focus on research output. The programme aims to create room for academics to stand out in other areas of their work as well: education, impact, leadership, teamwork and patient care. It also aims to foster

collaborations between academics by rewarding not only individual work, but also teamwork (Rewards & Recognition, n.d.).

A lot has happened since November 2019. Following the Rewards & Recognition Annual Report of 2022, different parties engage in dialogues, start collaborations (e.g. at the Rewards & Recognition Festival) and think of concrete ways to implement and evaluate the ideas. According to the ones involved in the development and implementation of the Rewards and Recognition Programme, the Netherlands is a frontrunner in an international trend towards a smaller focus on narrow research output, such as JIF and the H-index (Erkennen & Waarden, 2023). Again, my framework allows me to analyse these developments in a gradual and nuanced way.

The bad-making properties of psychological and emotional costs and opportunity costs are particularly insightful here. The new holistic way of evaluating academics may be more inclusive (as it is less about narrow JIF and the H-index and more holistic about the researcher's qualities as a whole), they are also more opaque (qualitative and narrative proposals are harder to compare with one another). This can have specific implications for early career academics who still need to 'get in' by obtaining a permanent contract. Given that early career academics need to stand out in the competition for scarce jobs, they are incentivised to not only excel in research and teaching, but show that they are well-rounded academics overall, including leadership skills and making societal impact. For academics who are already 'in' – i.e. those on a permanent contract – personalising one's career path based on one's qualities and interests, without having to

excel in *all* areas, might be easier, since the survival of their career is not at stake.

A more holistic yet opaque approach also risks widening the scope of competition for early career academics, because a wider range of qualities is taken into account when selecting the right candidate for the job. This may increase the opportunity costs, since it is in the early career academic's interest to invest time and effort into improving one's qualities across the board, including, as I mentioned, leadership skills and social impact. This may also lead to psychological and emotional costs, since all kinds of qualities are now subject to social evaluative threats, but it remains unclear which qualities really count in a specific competition for a job (or grant). Moreover, the extra time and effort spent on increasing one's chances of winning across the board, may lead to higher levels of stress and anxiety – one is never entirely free from competitive pressures, until one gets 'in'.

Especially policies directed at the 'entry gate' are crucial if one really wants to make academia less competitive and make room for everyone's talents, since that is also the phase where academics are most shapable still. Here, the gradual aspect of my framework comes in, as I believe that lowering the stakes and narrowing the scope also creates more room and tranquillity for early career academics to try out new ideas and really develop themselves as researchers without immediately having to fit into a mould. There are plenty of ways of doing this. One (more radical) way of curbing psychological, emotional and opportunity costs could be to put a cap on the number of papers a PhD candidate is allowed to publish over the course of its project. Or

another (less radical) way would be to limit the number of publications a PhD candidate is allowed to mention on the job or grant application. For example, they're only allowed to list the one publication that says most about their research interests.

Finally, it would be helpful to look through the lens of the bad-making property of corruption when evaluating the initiative to replace CVs that list one's achievements and publications by narrative CVs in the application procedure for grants. For example, it is questionable whether a narrative resume does more justice to/reflects better what the practice of research is about. A relevant question to ask would be: to what extent does one's ability to *narrate* about one's achievement and qualities really provide an accurate reflection of one's *actual* research and teaching qualities and how can we close this gap as much as possible? Most importantly, the shift that is happening in Dutch academia doesn't make the procedure any less competitive when the acceptance rates for grants remain low and (permanent) jobs remain scarce (i.e., the stakes remain high). There is merely a shift in selection criteria.

More could be said about DORA and the Rewards & Recognition Programme, but this brief analysis already demonstrates the added value of my framework. It provides a nuanced and systematic way of evaluating the policies by means of the various aggravating and bad-making properties.

## 5. Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to showcase the value of my framework as an evaluative tool by applying it to a concrete case: the early career stage in Dutch academia (and inform the reader about the current state of Dutch academia in the process). With regards to this goal, I have provided a sketch of the ways in which scarce goods are distributed competitively in Dutch academia and identified which factors determine the height of the stakes and the width of the scope (section 2). Then I demonstrated how my framework to assess the competitiveness of domains can be applied in practice. Through the lens of the different bad-making properties, I considered whether problematic degrees of psychological and emotional costs (3.1.), opportunity costs (3.2.), estrangement (3.3.) and corruption (3.4.) occur in Dutch academia.

Finally, I put my framework to the test and evaluated two policies that are (partially) aimed at limiting competition: (a) the proposal to replace competitive grant allocation schemes for non-competitive grant allocation schemes, notably, a lottery and basic funding; and (b) initiatives like DORA and Rewards & Recognition, meant to make room for a holistic way of evaluating talent beyond narrow metrics. The aggravating properties of stakes and scope and the bad-making properties of corruption, psychological and emotional costs, opportunity costs and corruption allowed me to evaluate these policies in a systematic, gradual and nuanced manner. For example, a given non-competitive grant allocation procedure might eliminate the

opportunity cost, but thereby also remove any incentive to write a quality proposal; some degree of opportunity costs is justified if this benefits the quality of the proposal, but may not lead to serious psychological and emotional costs, etc. Competition is not an all-or-nothing matter, but can be kept in check with the right policy interventions.

Now we've reached the end of my dissertation. In the following, concluding chapter, I will summarise my answer to my main research question: what, if anything, makes competition morally problematic and how do these moral problems inform our ethical evaluations of specific competitions in concrete domains and practices? I will also look back at my project and emphasise its added value more broadly.



# Chapter 8: Conclusion

## 1. The Greenest Leaves are Always at the Top

In his 1926 essay *The End of Laissez-Faire*, John Maynard Keynes argued against a dominant idea in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century economic and political philosophical thought, namely, the idea that laissez-faire market competition would lead to progress and efficacy. According to this idea, productive resources are best allocated through the free and independent actions of individuals – free from any state intervention and central planning. Through a ruthless struggle for survival, the most efficient profit-makers end up at the top of the competition, at the cost of those who are less efficient, who go bankrupt. Keynes illustrates this beautifully with a giraffe metaphor:

The object of life being to crop the leaves off the branches up to the greatest possible height, the likeliest way of achieving this end is to leave the giraffes with the longest necks to starve out those whose necks are shorter. (Keynes, 1926)

Just like the giraffes with the longest necks will be able to outcompete those with shorter necks, so too will the more efficient companies outdo the less efficient ones. Keynes argued that most theorists only looked at the presumed benefits of this laissez-faire struggle, while the

giraffes' struggle for the lushest, greenest leaves also leads to considerable *moral* problems:

[T]here are considerations, familiar enough, which rightly bring into the calculation the costs and the character of the competitive struggle itself [...] If we have the welfare of the giraffes at heart, we must not overlook the sufferings of the shorter necks who are starved out, or the sweet leaves which fall to the ground and are trampled underfoot in the struggle, or the overfeeding of the long-necked ones, or the evil look of anxiety or struggling greediness which overcasts the mild faces of the herd. (Keynes, 1926)

If we take the costs of the competitive struggle seriously and have the welfare of the giraffes at heart, following Keynes, we should not let market competition simply 'do its thing'. Social reform and (institutional) state intervention are needed when interactions within markets generate clear and predictable harms. Keynes concludes:

[T]he fiercest contests and the most deeply felt divisions of opinion are likely to be waged in the coming years not round technical questions, where the arguments on either side are mainly economic, but round those which, for want of better words, may be called psychological or, perhaps, moral. (Keynes, 1926)

*Moral* is indeed the right word here (as well as *psychological*<sup>96</sup>). Jumping to the present, almost 100 years after the publication of Keynes' essay, there is still plenty of terrain to be gained when it comes to exploring the moral issues of competition in a systematic and comprehensive manner. I tried to fill some of these gaps in this dissertation, in which I investigated what is morally problematic about competition, both within market settings (remember my claims about the competition for jobs on the labour market, for example) and beyond market settings. In the following section I will answer my main research question in a nutshell, after which I will zoom out and look at some broader philosophical and societal implications in section 3.

## **2. Answering my Research Question**

The main research question that ran through my dissertation was: what, if anything, makes competition morally problematic and how do these moral problems inform our ethical evaluations of specific competitions in concrete domains and practices? To answer this question, I went through different steps which were conceptual (chapter 2), philosophical anthropological (chapter 3), normative (chapters 4, 5 and 6) and applied (chapter 7) in nature.

I started out in chapter 2 by providing a definition of the central term of my dissertation: competition. After critically evaluating different definitions from the economic and philosophical literature, I

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<sup>96</sup> Recall the Harm Argument from chapter 5.

formulated a definition which contains the following elements: scarcity, rules and criteria, comparing and ranking relative performances and allocating scarce goods to those who end up at the top of the ranking, given these rules and criteria. This definition was formulated in such a way that it captured competitions that we encounter in day-to-day life, such as competition in the labour market, in the workplace, in education and during our leisure time activities. It explicitly diverges from formulations of the concept in highly idealised models of perfect market competition. I put special emphasis on competitions that serve as distribution, selection and organisation mechanisms, that is, on institutionalised ways of allocating scarce goods (to the ones at the top of the ranking) and incentivising participants to perform *better* than others, given certain criteria. This focus on competition as a distribution, selection and organisation mechanism was important for the normative and applied parts of my thesis: goods can always be distributed differently, people can always be selected based on various criteria and practices can always be organised in a variety of ways – yet how we go about this involves moral reflection and morally-informed decision-making.

However, before I moved on to the normative part of my research – where I addressed my research question explicitly – I first provided a response to those critics who think that competition is a *natural* phenomenon that falls outside of the realm of morality (chapter 3). More specifically, I addressed the argument that moral questions regarding competition are unwarranted, because we *just are* competitive creatures. Institutional efforts to counter these drives and

tendencies would deny our human nature, which would inevitably resurface again. I captured such arguments under the header of ‘the Naturalistic View’. I contrasted the Naturalistic View with what I called ‘the Socio-Historical View’, which argues that our human ‘nature’ is *purely* socially constructed. Eventually, I rejected both views and argued for a Rousseauian notion of human nature, where our *amour-propre* and our competitive drives are inevitable yet malleable. Institutions – and our normative views on good institutional design – play a crucial role in making various non-competitive forms of recognition available to people and shaping our competitive drives in a fruitful and non-destructive manner.

By then, the conceptual (chapter 2) and philosophical anthropological (chapter 3) foundations of my thesis were laid, which allowed me to move on to the normative part of my research (chapters 4, 5 and 6), where I answered the question: what, if anything, makes competition morally problematic and how do these moral problems inform our ethical evaluations of specific competitions in concrete domains and practices? My response to this question can be summarised as follows: what is distinctly morally problematic about competition is that it tends to corrupt practices, pose social-evaluative threats, incur opportunity costs and estrange people, so we have strong reasons not to organise competitions. However – and here my gradual account of competition comes in – the stakes and the scope of the competition determine the moral weight of these moral problems. The stakes refer to the rewards/the scarce goods at play in a competition: which scarce goods can be won; how important/vital are they; amongst

how many people are they distributed; and what do people lose out on if they don't obtain these goods? The stakes can be higher or lower. The scope refers to how many (aspects of) practices/domains are organised competitively; and how many goods within a practice/domain can only be obtained in a competitive manner. The scope can be wider or narrower. The higher the stakes and the wider the scope, the more morally problematic a competition is, and the stronger the reasons we have to lower the stakes, narrow the scope or eliminate the competition altogether, depending on the scarce goods in question. Let me elaborate on each of the moral problems that I identified: corruption, psychological and emotional costs, opportunity costs and estrangement.

Given that institutionalised competition incentivises people to obtain external goods (such as money and prestige), the cooperative care for the practice's internal goods can get compromised. That is, competition can lead to practices – which at the same time is sustained by that same institution – becoming corrupted. This was captured by the Corruption Argument in chapter 4.

Then, in chapter 5, I developed another argument to capture what is distinctly morally problematic about competition. It built on Waheed Hussain's argument that competition gives people strong reasons to disregard one another (2020), but incorporated it into my broader Harm Argument, which identifies three harms that are typical for competition: (a) psychological and emotional costs; (b) opportunity costs; and (c) (following Hussain) estrangement.

Regarding (a), given that competition implies that participants' performances are compared to know who is at the top of the ranking and can therefore claim the prized status of 'winner' (and possibly other scarce goods), esteem and recognition risk becoming attached to one's *relative position*. Competition (for vital goods) poses a social evaluative threat, as participants put themselves and their sense of self-worth on the line and can consequently incur psychological and emotional costs when they turn out to be not good enough.

Then, regarding (b), given that winning involves performing *better* than the others, within the constraints of the rules, participants are incentivised to invest time, money and other resources into improving one's relative position. This leads to opportunity costs; the time, money and other resources could have been spent on other things as well.

Finally (c), given that competition involves mutually exclusive goal attainment – where one participant carrying out a plan to obtain the scarce vital good being distributed necessarily interferes with another participant carrying out their plan to obtain the same scarce good – the different participants have strong reasons to disregard one another.

The foregoing arguments culminated in a framework (in chapter 6) which informs our ethical evaluation of competitions in concrete domains and practices. The framework consists of four bad-making properties (corruption, estrangement, psychological and emotional costs and opportunity costs) and two aggravating properties (stakes and scope). The higher the stakes and the wider the scope, the

more the other bad-making properties get aggravated and the more morally problematic a competition can be said to be.

Finally, in chapter 7, I demonstrated the value of my framework by applying it to a case where competition is already considered to be a problem: Dutch academia, where I focussed particularly on the phase early on in academic career. Academic action group WOinActie, for instance, warns for the “destructive effects of faith in endless competition” (WOinActie, 2019). I showcased that my framework enables a better diagnosis of competition’s problems and adds to the existing policy proposals and initiatives out there by evaluating some of these in a nuanced and gradual way through the lens of stakes, scope, corruption, psychological and emotional costs, opportunity costs and estrangement.

In short, competition is not an all-or-nothing matter, nor a phenomenon that is governed by natural laws, but can be kept in check in a nuanced and gradual way with the right (policy) interventions.

### **3. The Bigger Picture**

To conclude my dissertation, let me zoom out and consider how my conceptual, philosophical anthropological and normative approach of competition informs not only how we should evaluate competitions around us but also how we see others, ourselves and what we deem valuable in life. If we indeed recognise that competition is not some natural phenomenon outside of the sphere of morality, but something we can shape and finetune in numerous ways, which implications does



that have on society more generally? Referring back to Keynes' giraffe metaphor (1926), if we take the competitive struggle and its costs seriously and have the welfare of the giraffes at heart, what implications does that have for those who do and those who don't get access to the lushest leaves at the top? The added value of my dissertation can be captured into three broader insights.

*Insight Number 1: Widespread and Institutionalised Competition Makes Recognition and Esteem Conditional Upon How One Compares to Others*

As we have seen in chapter 3, *amour-propre*, our drive for esteem and recognition and the desire to have one's individual merit confirmed by others is inevitable and distinctly human. However, *amour-propre* is always shaped in relationship with others and by the broader social and institutional context we live in. For our *amour-propre* to remain healthy, it is important that institutions enable various forms of recognition. While some of them might be competitive, as long as the stakes are low enough, institutions need to make enough non-competitive ways of recognition available as well. Think for instance of recognising and treating everybody as equal human beings, appreciating a colleague's valuable contributions to the team and acknowledging that every member of an organisation has unique needs and talents.

However, the wider the scope of competition in society, and the fewer (institutional) space there is left where one can be free from competition, the more one is constantly evaluated and ranked in

comparison to others, and the more recognition and esteem become conditional upon how one compares to others. In other words, the more the strive for success and having to outperform others becomes the new normal (cf. the first part of the title of my dissertation: *When Success Becomes the New Normal*), the more our esteem becomes conditional upon our position in a ranking. If you're at the top, you receive praise and recognition, however fleetingly, until the next competition comes round where you must prove yourself. The others (the 'losers'), in turn, are deprived from praise and recognition, until they can prove otherwise. The widespread and institutionalised strive to perform and *be* better than others may therefore be symptomatic of the difficulty of attaining unconditional (self-)esteem in a thoroughly competitive society (cf. the second part of the title of my dissertation: *The Competitive Society and its Symptoms*). Only if enough non-competitive ways of recognition are made available, where people can develop their *amour-propre* in healthy ways, will members of societies not have to constantly prove themselves and their worth in relation to others and continuously try to be better than others.

### *Insight Number 2: Fairness Is Not Enough*

My dissertation shows that there can still be something morally problematic about competition even if conditions of fairness have been met (regardless of which conception of fairness one holds). This has important implications for, for example, selection committees, who make decisions about which candidate gets the job, the grant or the admission to a selective bachelor's, master's or traineeship programme.

Most employers and funding bodies commit to fair procedures and, in the name of fairness, often encourage people with minority backgrounds to apply. And while there is still a lot to do when it comes to creating greater equality of opportunity, my dissertation has shown that fairness is not the whole picture. Even if one manages to organise completely fair competitions, there can also be something like too much competition.

To illustrate, let me go back to the giraffe metaphor and expand on the “moral” and “psychological” problems that Keynes (1926) identified. Even if the necks of the giraffes are all at the same length, meaning that they can all reach the same leaves, the leaves themselves remain scarce. Pitting giraffes against each other for a limited quantity of leaves still gives them strong reasons to disregard one another and starve out others for their own gain (which I captured by the bad-making property of estrangement). Moreover, losing out on luscious greens cannot be blamed on one’s shorter neck anymore, since they’re all the same length. What prevents them from having access now is their inability – due to a lack of strength or agility, for example – to claim the leaves for oneself. This arguably incurs psychological and emotional costs (another bad-making property from my framework); one is not only excluded from food, one is excluded because one is weaker or less agile than the others. The giraffes are therefore incentivised to get stronger and acquire techniques to obtain the leaves (at the expense of the others) next time (cf. opportunity costs).

Finally, corruption can occur, even if conditions of fairness have been met. That is, also if the playing field would be completely

level, competitors can still be so caught up in the race for scarce, external goods, that they lose sight of the practice's internal goods, including the cooperative care that is needed to nurture these internal goods.

The important point here is, again, that all these harms are typical of competitions even if these are fair. Institutions should therefore not only be just, but should also aim to keep corruption, psychological and emotional costs, opportunity costs and estrangement to a minimum, or avoid them altogether, when designing (competitive or non-competitive) policies. When there are scarce goods to be distributed, one should not only ask whether any given competitive procedure is fair or not but also whether it makes sense to have a competitive procedure at all.

*Insight Number 3: Competition is Not Natural, Nor Is It an All-Or-Nothing Matter, But Should Always Be Evaluated and Adjusted in a Gradual and Nuanced Way*

The central question of my dissertation is: what, if anything, makes competition morally problematic and how do these moral problems inform our ethical evaluations of specific competitions in concrete domains and practices? I developed the conceptual and normative tools to evaluate in a gradual way what is morally problematic about competitive social practices and domains. Depending on the scarce, vital good at stake, competition is not justified at all (e.g. when it concerns access to basic health care) or can be justified, but only if the stakes are low enough and the scope narrow enough (e.g. the job market

with a strong safety net in place). This has serious implications for the way we evaluate and design our social world. To illustrate, let me come back to two examples from the introduction (chapter 1).

Recall the example of parents spending an increasing amount of resources on private tutoring to make sure their children score well at the ‘Cito-toets’, an exam that helps to classify kids into ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ educational levels and partially determines their future career options. My framework offers a helpful lens through which we can critically evaluate this phenomenon. Given the height of the stakes at play, it is in the individual parent’s interest to invest money into private tutoring and it is in the individual child’s interest to take these extra classes. Both thereby incur opportunity costs. To sketch a gradual and nuanced picture of the situation, the impact on the children’s (self-)esteem and stress levels should be taken into account (which is one of competition’s bad-making properties). And it should be considered whether children have strong reasons to disregard one another (captured by the bad-making property of estrangement). For example, do those with higher scores look down upon those with lower scores and do those with ‘lower’ scores experience any form of inferiority or jealousy with regards to their higher scoring classmates? One final element that my framework allows us to assess is whether the pressure to score well at the test (better than others) affects the children’s attitudes towards learning and what is intrinsically valuable about gaining knowledge. With all this information at hand, it is up to policy makers and social designers to see where in the system the stakes and the scope can be adjusted accordingly.

Second, recall the oft-heard criticism that institutions in domains that were not governed by market forces before, such as health care and education, now have to compete for scarce resources as efficiently as possible. Also here, my framework offers the conceptual and normative tools to assess – in a nuanced and gradual way – whether competition is appropriate at all and if so, to what extent. The bad-making property of corruption allows us to evaluate whether the paper reality that contains outputs and other measures is in line with what is actually considered good quality health care or education. The bad-making properties of psychological and emotional costs and opportunity costs help us understand that inter-institutional competition for scarce resources can trickle down to the employees ‘on the ground’ and add work pressure to meet increasingly demanding targets (at the cost of what really matters: providing good care and giving quality classes). Finally, the bad-making property of estrangement helps us consider whether institutions behave strategically towards one another with the aim of obtaining the scarce vital good at the expense of others. Again, based on how the different bad-making properties play out in practice and how grave the different harms are that competition predictably brings about, the stakes and the scope should be adjusted to minimise the harms that competition typically brings about.

In short, in a society where competition and (the strive for) success becomes increasingly the ‘new normal’, my dissertation provides the conceptual and normative tools to assess and diagnose in a gradual way

the moral problems associated with competition and how they manifest themselves in concrete domains and practices. Hence the title of my dissertation: *When Success Becomes the New Normal: The Competitive Society and its Symptoms*. Corruption, psychological and emotional costs, opportunity costs and estrangement are the worrying symptoms of the many competitions being organised for scarce, vital goods. As a society, we should think critically and carefully about the nature and the effects that competition has before we let it govern our lives, our well-being, our practices and our relations.

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## English Summary

The central question that this dissertation answers is: what, if anything, makes competition morally problematic and how do these moral problems inform our ethical evaluations of specific competitions in concrete domains and practices? In short, it argues that competition has a tendency to corrupt practices, can lead to substantial opportunity, psychological and emotional costs and estranges people from one another. These arguments result in an evaluative framework which can be used to assess the downsides of competition in concrete instances and inform us about the adjustments that need to be made to create a 'healthier' environment (even if the competition is fair and we have good reasons overall to organise that specific competition).

Ultimately, the dissertation aims to put into question the self-evidence with which competition is introduced and intensified in various domains of life, such as the labour market, education, health care and academia. It aims to show that the moral problems associated with competition are not mere unfortunate side-effects but baked into its very nature.

My dissertation builds on the work from political and moral philosophers and economists. It also contains empirical studies to show that my conceptual and normative claims have bearing in our empirical reality. My conceptual analysis and evaluative framework offer novel insights into the moral problems of competition in today's society and its institutional implications.

I answer my main research question over the course of six substantive chapters. In chapter 2 I construct my definition of competition. I consult the economics literature and the political philosophical literature, after which I formulate my own definition. I argue that a plausible definition of competition must contain the following elements: there are multiple *participants* whose *performances* are being *compared* and *ranked*; *rules* and *procedures* stipulate the process through which participants can win; and the one who is ranked highest, according to the rules, obtains the prized status of ‘*winner*’ and potentially other *scarce goods* (such as prizes, money and prestige).

Before moving on to the part of my dissertation that lays out the moral problems of competition, I first need to provide a reply to those critics who think that we are competitive by nature and that, therefore, competition falls outside of the realm of morally. In the philosophical anthropological chapter 3, I compare three views on human nature and the institutional implications of each view. After comparing what I call the ‘Naturalistic View’ and the ‘Socio-Historical View’, I eventually argue for a Rousseauian View. This view offers a gradual account of *amour-propre* and human competitiveness that is *inevitable* as well as *malleable*. It is the task of institutions to shape our competitive drives in healthy ways and prevent them from becoming inflamed; yet how they should do that is a moral question.

Once the conceptual and philosophical anthropological foundations are laid, I move to the normative part of my dissertation.

In chapters 4 and 5 I provide answers to the first part of my research question: what, if anything, makes competition morally problematic?

In chapter 4 I develop my Corruption Argument. In short, I argue that something of value gets lost when we organise practices competitively. I use MacIntyre's concepts of 'practice', 'institution', 'virtue', 'internal' and 'external goods' and Sandel's notion of corrupting markets to make my case that institutionalised competition for external goods, too, tends to corrupt practices by crowding out its internal goods.

Then, in chapter 5, I develop another, complementary answer to the first part of my research question. Under the heading of the 'Harm Argument', I argue that certain harms are typical for competitive distributions (compared to other distributions). The problem is not simply that competition excludes some people, the 'losers', from obtaining scarce, vital goods (in every distribution of scarce goods some people miss the boat). Typical for competition, however, is that this exclusion is accompanied by three specific harms: (a) psychological and emotional costs; (b) opportunity costs; and (c) estrangement. I argue that the moral objections against competition give us strong *pro tanto* reasons not to distribute vital goods competitively.

In chapter 6 I tie the Corruption Argument and the Harm Argument together in my answer to the second part of my research question: how do the foregoing moral problems inform our ethical evaluations of specific competitions in concrete domains and practices? In response to this question, I develop a framework that consists of two

aggravating properties – stakes and scope – and four bad-making properties – corruption, estrangement, psychological and emotional costs and opportunity costs – and can be used to assess the moral problems associated with competitive domains and practices. The higher the stakes of the competition and the wider its scope, the more moral problems occur, or so I argue.

Finally, in chapter 7, I showcase the value of my framework by applying it to a concrete case: Dutch academia, and particularly the phase early on in one's career. I dive into policy documents and empirical studies to assess whether, and to what extent, the aforementioned aggravating and bad-making properties apply in this concrete case. I conclude the chapter with an evaluation of some policy proposals and initiatives aimed at reducing competition.

In sum, a society that celebrates success, winning and being 'the best' comes with substantial costs and losses. It affects how we perceive others (as competitors) and ourselves (in comparison to others). And, in the strive for success, we risk losing sight of those things that really matter (such as a curiosity for the world around us, friendship and solidarity).



## Nederlandse samenvatting

De centrale vraag die dit proefschrift beantwoordt is: wat maakt competitie moreel problematisch en hoe informeren deze morele problemen onze ethische evaluaties van specifieke competities in concrete domeinen en praktijken? Ik beargumenteer dat competitie praktijken dreigt te corrumperen, het kan leiden tot opportuniteits-, psychologische en emotionele kosten en mensen van elkaar vervreemdt. Deze argumenten resulteren in een evaluatief raamwerk dat kan worden gebruikt om de nadelen van competitie in concrete gevallen te beoordelen. Ik beargumenteer dat de morele bezwaren tegen competitie serieus meegewogen moeten worden, ook als de competitie op een eerlijke manier wordt georganiseerd en we goede redenen hebben om die specifieke competitie alsnog door te laten gaan.

Uiteindelijk beoogt het proefschrift de vanzelfsprekendheid ter discussie te stellen waarmee competitie wordt aangewakkerd en opgestookt in verschillende levensdomeinen, zoals de arbeidsmarkt, het onderwijs, de gezondheidszorg en de academische wereld. Ik laat zien dat de morele problemen die met competitie gepaard gaan niet slechts ongelukkige neveneffecten zijn die we voor lief moeten nemen, maar juist in de aard van competitie zitten ingebakken.

Mijn proefschrift bouwt voort op het werk van politieke en moraalfilosofen en economen. Daarnaast bevat het empirische studies om te laten zien dat mijn conceptuele en normatieve claims ook hun weerslag hebben op onze empirische werkelijkheid. Mijn conceptuele

analyse en evaluatieve raamwerk bieden vernieuwde inzichten in de morele problemen van competitie in de huidige maatschappij en de institutionele implicaties hiervan.

Ik beantwoord mijn onderzoeksvraag stap voor stap in zes inhoudelijke hoofdstukken. In hoofdstuk 2 stel ik mijn definitie van competitie op. Ik raadpleeg de economieliteratuur en de politieke filosofieliteratuur, waarna ik mijn eigen definitie formuleer. Ik beargumenteer dat een plausibele definitie van competitie de volgende elementen moet bevatten: er zijn meerdere *deelnemers* wiens prestaties *vergeleken* en *gerangschikt* worden; de *regels* en *procedures* bepalen op welke manier de deelnemers kunnen winnen; en degene die vervolgens het hoogst gerangschikt wordt, verkrijgt de gewaardeerde status van ‘*winnaar*’ en mogelijk andere *schaarse goederen* (zoals prijzen, geld en prestige).

Voordat ik de morele problemen van competitie uiteenzet, zal ik eerst antwoord geven op de kritiek die stelt dat competitie überhaupt niets te maken heeft met moraliteit. ‘We zijn nu eenmaal van nature competitief,’ zou een criticus kunnen zeggen. In hoofdstuk 3 vergelijk ik drie visies op de menselijke natuur met elkaar, inclusief de institutionele implicaties van elke visie. Nadat ik stil heb gestaan bij wat ik de ‘naturalistische visie’ en de ‘sociaalhistorische visie’ noem, pleit ik uiteindelijk voor een Rousseauiaanse visie. Volgens deze visie zijn onze natuurlijke verlangens naar zelfliefde (*amour-propre*) en competitiviteit *onvermijdelijk*, maar in belangrijke mate ook *kneedbaar*. Het is daarom de taak van sociale instituties om een voedingsbodem te creëren waarin gezonde vormen van zelfliefde

kunnen floreren en onze competitieve driften in toom te houden. Hoe instituties dit echter moeten doen, is een morele vraag, waar de rest van de hoofdstukken aan gewijd is.

Zodra de conceptuele (hoofdstuk 2) en filosofisch antropologische (hoofdstuk 3) fundamenteën zijn gelegd, ga ik over naar het normatieve deel van mijn proefschrift. In hoofdstukken 4 en 5 geef ik antwoord op het eerste deel van mijn onderzoeksvraag: wat maakt competitie precies moreel problematisch?

In hoofdstuk 4 ontwikkel ik mijn Corruptie-argument. Kortgezegd beargumenteer ik dat er iets van waarde verloren gaat wanneer we praktijken competitief organiseren. Om dit punt kracht bij te zetten, maak ik gebruik van MacIntyre's concepten 'praktijk', 'institutie', 'deugzaamheid', 'interne' en 'externe goederen' en van Sandels' notie van corrumperende markten. Ik concludeer dat geïnstitutionaliseerde competitie voor externe goederen onze praktijken dreigen te corrumperen door hun interne goederen te verdringen. Ter illustratie, de strijd tussen academici voor al maar meer publicaties, grotere beurzen en prestigieuzere prijzen (externe goederen) neigt ten koste te gaan van de zoektocht naar meer wijsheid en kennis, inclusief de zorg, het geduld en de samenwerkingen die ervoor nodig zijn om deze wijsheid en kennis te kunnen vergaren (de zogenaamde interne goederen). Het is precies deze eigenschap van competitie – waarbij het verkrijgen van externe goederen al onze aandacht opeist ten koste van andere waardevolle zaken – wat het zo moreel problematisch maakt.

Vervolgens formuleer ik in hoofdstuk 5 een ander, aanvullend antwoord op het eerste deel van mijn onderzoeksvraag. Onder de noemer ‘Harm Argument’ ofwel ‘Schade-argument’, betoog ik dat competitie een bepaalde vorm van schade berokkent aan de deelnemers die typisch is voor competitie. Deze schade kan niet simpelweg gevat worden in het feit dat sommigen (de ‘verliezers’) per definitie uitgesloten worden van belangrijke schaarse goederen; bij elke verdeling van schaarse goederen missen sommigen namelijk de boot, ook als deze op basis van bijvoorbeeld een loterij of senioriteit worden vergeven. Kenmerkend voor competitie, daarentegen, is dat deze uitsluiting gepaard gaat met drie specifieke vormen van schade: (a) de *psychologische en emotionele kosten* van het constant vergeleken worden met anderen; (b) de *opportuïteitskosten* van het almaar proberen om niet achter te raken op de rest; en (c) de *vervreemding* die optreedt tussen mensen als ze tegen elkaar opgezet worden.

Ik beargumenteer dat deze morele bezwaren tegen competitie ons sterke *pro tanto* redenen geven om vitale goederen op een niet-competitieve manier te verdelen binnen onze maatschappij.

In hoofdstuk 6 breng ik het Corruptie-argument en het Schade-argument samen in mijn antwoord op het tweede deel van mijn onderzoeksvraag: hoe informeren de voorgaande morele bezwaren onze ethische evaluaties van specifieke competities in concrete domeinen en praktijken? In dit hoofdstuk ontwikkel ik een evaluatief raamwerk bestaande uit twee versterkende factoren – *stakes* en *scope* – en vier factoren die competities bezwaarlijk maken – corruptie, vervreemding, psychologische en emotionele kosten en

opportuniteitskosten. In het kort: hoe meer er te winnen en verliezen valt binnen een competitie (ofwel, hoe hoger de *stakes*) en hoe meer aspecten van ons leven/onze maatschappij door competitie worden beïnvloed (ofwel, hoe breder de *scope*), hoe meer morele problemen zich voordoen.

In hoofdstuk 7 laat ik zien dat mijn raamwerk ook daadwerkelijk gebruikt kan worden en (aanvullende) inzichten biedt in de evaluatie van competities in onze maatschappij. Hierbij richt ik me op een concrete casus: de academische wereld in Nederland, waarbij ik me met name focus op de fase aan het begin van iemands carrière. Ik duik in beleidsdocumenten en empirische studies om te beoordelen of, en in welke mate, de eerdergenoemde factoren van toepassing zijn in deze casus. Ik sluit het hoofdstuk af met een evaluatie van enkele beleidsvoorstellen en initiatieven die gedaan zijn door instanties als de NWO en Universiteiten van Nederland die gericht zijn op het verminderen van competitie.

Kortom, een samenleving die succes, winnen en ‘de beste’ zijn viert, brengt aanzienlijke kosten en verliezen met zich mee. Het beïnvloedt hoe we anderen zien, namelijk als concurrenten die we voorbij moeten streven. Eigenwaarde wordt begrepen in termen van onze positie in vergelijking met anderen. En in ons streven naar succes lopen we het risico de dingen die er *echt* toe doen (zoals nieuwsgierigheid naar de wereld om ons heen, vriendschap en solidariteit) uit het oog te verliezen.



