

Putting yourself on the line: The harms of competition

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ABSTRACT Competition is a key element in the design of social institutions in contemporary liberal democracies. Competitive procedures for jobs, grants and university admissions can be considered ‘substantially engulfing’ since they provide access to important goods that everyone has reasons to want, such as financial security, the social bases of self-respect and education. While competition can have beneficial outcomes and can be a fair way of selecting meritorious candidates, this paper aims to identify the *distinctive moral problems* it raises by developing what we call a ‘Harm Account’ of competition. We argue that substantially engulfing competitions predictably lead to three types of harm: (1) substantial psychological and emotional costs; (2) substantial opportunity costs; and (3) estrangement. These harms provide strong *pro tanto* reasons against organizing substantially engulfing competitions for important goods. The weight of these reasons depends on the stakes and scope of the competition at hand.

KEYWORDS Competition; harm; opportunity costs; self-esteem; estrangement.

RESUMO A concorrência é um elemento-chave na configuração das instituições sociais nas democracias liberais contemporâneas. Os procedimentos competitivos para empregos, bolsas e admissões na universidade podem ser considerados “substancialmente envolventes”, uma vez que permitem o acesso a bens importantes que todos têm razões para desejar, como a segurança financeira, as bases sociais do respeito por si próprio e a educação. Embora a concorrência possa ter resultados benéficos e possa ser uma forma justa de seleccionar candidatos meritórios, este artigo visa identificar os *problemas morais distintivos* que suscita, desenvolvendo aquilo a que chamamos uma “Abordagem do Dano” da concorrência. Argumentamos que as competições substancialmente envolventes conduzem, previsivelmente, a três tipos de danos: (1) custos psicológicos e emocionais substanciais; (2) custos de oportunidade substanciais; e (3) distanciamento. Estes danos fornecem fortes razões *pro tanto* contra a organização de competições substancialmente envolventes para bens importantes. O peso destas razões depende dos interesses e do âmbito da competição em causa.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE Competição; dano; custos de oportunidade; auto-estima; distanciamento.

1 Introduction

Competition is “a key ingredient in the design of social institutions” (Agmon, 2022, p. 6) in contemporary liberal democracies. Many practices regulated by basic social institutions, such as the labor market, the workplace and education are organized – in important respects – competitively. Throughout the paper, we will focus specifically on competitive procedures for jobs, grants and (university) admissions. Winning these competitions gives access to important goods such as financial security, social standing, the social bases of self-respect and education.

Competitive allocation and selection procedures undoubtedly lead to beneficial outcomes (Lütge, 2019; Agmon, 2022) and can be a fair way of selecting meritorious candidates (Mulligan, 2018). While it has been argued that there are moral limits to competition (Hussain, 2018, p. 570; Hussain, 2020, p. 80), what it is exactly that makes competition morally problematic, has not been sufficiently explored in the literature. This paper seeks to identify the moral problems that are distinctive of competition. All too often, competitions are organized and justified on the basis of the benefits they supposedly produce (such as efficiency, growth, performance enhancement, merit tracking), but the harms they predictably generate are overlooked or downplayed. This paper aims to identify the distinctive moral problems of competition by developing a gradual account that focuses on specific types of harms that competitions predictably generate.

First, we explain what we mean by ‘competition’ (section 2) and situate our contribution in the academic literature on competition (section 3). Next, we develop our Harm Account of competition (section 4). The distinctive moral problem of competition, we argue, is not that it excludes people from important goods – every distribution mechanism, whether they be competitions, lotteries or needs-based systems, excludes people when goods are genuinely scarce – but that the risk of being excluded comes with three distinct harms that competitions predictably impose on participants: serious psychological and emotional costs (section 4.1), substantial opportunity costs (section 4.2) and, as Hussain (2020) has argued, estrangement (section 4.3). These harms provide *pro tanto* reasons not to distribute goods competitively (section 5) but can be diminished by lowering the stakes and narrowing the scope of competitions (section 6). Finally, we conclude (section 7).

2 What is competition?

This paper focuses on certain competitions, namely those that have a big impact on people's daily lives, because they give access to important goods that everyone in a society has reasons to want. Examples of such goods are financial security, social standing, educational opportunities and the social bases of self-respect. The competitions we have in mind are those for jobs, grants and (university) admissions. The following definition neatly captures what we mean by '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 other desirable scarce goods (such as recognition, prizes, jobs and grants). The arrangement is designed to compare the participants' performances and rank them accordingly. Participants ranked highest, as stipulated by the rules, can claim the status of 'winners' and receive (a greater measure of) scarce goods at the expense of participants ranked lower – the 'losers' – who get none (or a smaller measure of) of the scarce goods.

In our view, this definition captures what is distinctive about competition, namely that it distributes and allocates (scarce desirable) goods in a mutually exclusive, performance-based manner. Let us explain its various elements, which will also play a role in our normative analysis of competition.

Competitive arrangements are characterized by rules that determine which procedures must be followed to obtain the prized status of 'winner' and which criteria determine how participants are ranked and goods are distributed. In line with Christoph Lütge (2019, p. 6), these rules differentiate competitions from mere battles or Hobbesian wars of all against all.

The notion of *scarce goods* refers to what economists call 'rival goods': goods that can only be obtained or consumed by a single party. Examples are jobs, prizes or being the number 1 in a race. The rules of a competition are such that full adherence to them creates a context for strategic interaction among its members. Competitions are what Hussain calls 'Rivalry-Defining Arrangements' (RDA's) (2020, p. 83), where people are pitted against each other when trying to obtain access to the goods at stake. As Alfie Kohn puts it: "If I must try to

defeat you to get what I want, then what I want is scarce by definition” (Kohn, 1992, p. 4).

Competitions distribute scarce goods by looking at the *performances* of participants. These are typically supposed to reflect some trait or ability. A competition “must test the capacity of the players, and to do this it must compel them to exert effort” (Knight, 1923, p. 608). The allocation can be backward-looking when it considers and rewards past performances, but it can also be forward-looking when past achievements are used as an indication for future performances. The achievements you list on your resume are a proxy for your capacities as a potential employee, for instance. If a good is distributed by means of a lottery, on the other hand, who wins is purely a matter of chance, not of (the evaluation of) performance.

The final key notion is that of a *ranking*. Competitions rank performances, i.e. hierarchically differentiate between those who perform better (according to the rules and criteria) and those who perform worse. This doesn’t need to be a full ranking with all participants listed. In some cases, only the first place or the top three is determined and the rest of the participants ends up as ‘losers’.¹ Because the top positions on such rankings are fixed-sum, participants are forced to engage in a mutually exclusive strive for them, where one participant’s success necessarily comes at the cost of the others.

Since competitions artificially create the socially scarce position of ‘winner’ (or ‘top 3’ or ‘top 10%’), competitions in our view are always positional in nature. Social scarcity is a key characteristic of positional goods (Hirsch, 1999). Obviously, competitions can determine access to goods that are positional in nature, i.e. the value of which depends (in varying degrees) on social comparison, i.e. on people’s relative position in the distribution of those goods (Brighouse & Swift 2006). Competitions are organized for highly positional goods such as educational degrees (the value of which to its possessor depends strongly on how it compares to the degrees others have), but also for goods that are hardly positional such as research time (which is valuable regardless of other people’s

¹ Our definition deliberately excludes whatever subjective attitudes competitors have. For example, one might participate in The British Bake Off solely for the love of baking, without having any competitive attitude or desire to outperform others. However, we still speak of a competition here, because the show is organized (and its rules are stipulated) such that participants’ cakes are compared and ranked and contestants who perform worst have to leave the show and those perform best win (a prize). Even though participants may enjoy and benefit from the show, everyone except one loses the competition. We thank Huub Brouwer for challenging us on this point.

research time but can be allocated on the basis of competitive research funding schemes). But even the latter competitions involve a positional element as they crucially invoke rankings and create the socially scarce position of ‘winners’, which would not exist in their absence and which determine who gets access to the goods at stake. Regardless of a competition’s rewards (positional in nature or not), where competitors end up on the ranking and the status that comes with this are positional. The literature on positional competition (Brighthouse & Swift 2006; Cass 2023; Drissen 2023; Frank, 2007; 2011; Goodin, 1990; Halliday, 2015; Halliday & Hankins, 2020; Harel Ben Shahr, 2018; Hirsch 1999) will particularly inform one aspect of our Harm Account, namely, that of opportunity costs (section 4.2).

In this paper, we focus on high-stake competitions that Hussain calls “substantially engulfing” (2020, pp. 85-86). Turning away from amateur sports and games – where stakes are low and people can easily opt-out – we focus on competitions with a bigger impact on people’s lives, such as those for desirable jobs,² grants and (university) admissions. The rules of these arrangements (i) determine the access to important goods that everyone has reasons to want (like financial security, education, social standing and the social bases of self-respect) and (ii) seriously constrain people’s liberty to exit or dissolve these competitions (Hussain, 2020, p. 86). Because such substantially engulfing competitions have high stakes and are hard to escape, they deserve the kind of the ethical scrutiny that we aim to provide here.

3 Situating our account in the literature on competition

Before developing our own approach to competition’s characteristic moral problems, let us first situate it in the small but growing ethical and politico-philosophical literature on competition.

Most discussions in political philosophy focus on the fairness of institutionalized competitions³ (for example, see: Rawls, 1971, p. 101;

² We remain agnostic about which jobs are desirable. A top position at a prestigious bank is typically highly sought after; it comes with an excellent salary and a lot of power and social status. At the same time, however, landing a job as a supermarket cashier can be important for a lot of people as it gives access to vital goods such as financial stability.

³ In our paper, we are interested in institutions, like labor markets, companies and funding agencies, that distribute scarce goods competitively, by setting and enforcing specific rules and procedures. Such ‘institutionalized competition’ is what we mean when we speak

Gomberg, 1995; Jacobs, 2010; Fishkin, 2014; and Suttle, 2022). Rather than asking what makes competitions (un)fair, we want to assess what, if anything, is morally problematic about competitions, even when they can be assumed to be fair (according to whatever understanding of fairness one prefers).

Take a meritocratic approach, in which competitions are considered tools to appropriately reward those who deserve it. If there are good reasons to select the best-qualified candidate for a job, a grant or a college admission, regardless of irrelevant characteristics like skin color or gender, organizing a competition is often thought to be the best and fairest way of identifying that candidate. This makes sense, as competitions compare and rank candidates' performances and qualifications. According to Thomas Mulligan (2018, p. 20), "the economic competitions (for jobs, income, etc.) that we feel are fair and those that are required by justice are one and the same." In a fair competition (understood in the meritocratic sense), those who come out on top not only win the goods at hand, but *deserve* to win them (Mulligan, 2018, p. 69). Meritocracy, then, is a *myth* insofar as rewards are *not* distributed based on merit but other factors – like family background, personal wealth and other forms of undeserved (dis)advantage – play a key role in determining who wins and who loses. On this account of fairness, a distribution is unjust when it is not meritocratic (enough).⁴

That said, there are practical, psychological, social and other reasons why organizing fully meritocratic competitions proves very difficult. If competitions are not fair and other factors (besides an honest assessment of performances) are at play, such as biases or nepotism, the winners (or losers) of competitions do not deserve to win (or lose). Our aim here, however, is to show that there is something morally problematic about competitions *even if they are fair*. We thus aim to provide an account of the distinctive moral problems of competition (as a specific kind of arrangement), not of what fairness (understood in meritocratic or other terms) requires in this context.

This also connects to our above definition of competition. A possible objection to it is that performances are often *not* what matters in (deter-

of 'competition' throughout the paper. The paper does not focus on more informal competitions and inter-personal rivalry, which can for example exist between neighbors, siblings, classmates or friends. In these cases, there are no institutionalized rules that actively pit people against each other, but simply because one is envious or jealous of another.

⁴ See also Markovits (2019), Sandel (2020) and Wooldridge (2021). We thank an anonymous reviewer for their suggestion to embed Mulligan's quote into the broader literature on (the myth of) meritocracy.

mining the rankings in) competitions. Instead, whether one has the right gender, looks or connections often determines whether one gets a job, a grant or a college admission. However, the fact that actual competitions can work like this is no argument against our *definition* of competition. In our view, the more a competitive arrangement, like a selection procedure for jobs, grants or college admissions, is infused with biases or nepotism, the *less* competitive it becomes, since these factors are at odds with competition's core characteristic: distributing goods on the basis of comparing and ranking participants' performances. Our account then is not so much concerned with the extent to which specific selection and allocation procedures are actually competitive. Instead, it aims to analyze what is morally problematic about selection and allocation procedures that are competitive on our understanding of it.

So how does our approach to competition relate to other recent insights from the contemporary literature on competition? Whereas the economics and business ethics literature mostly focuses narrowly on market competition (Schumpeter, 1983; 2003; Knight, 1923; Hayek, 1948, chapter V; Friedman, 1955; McMahon, 1981; and more recently, Dietsch, 2010; and Heath, 2014), our scope is broader as we analyze different kinds of competitions with a substantial impact on people's lives, both within markets (like competitions for jobs) and beyond (like competitions for grants or college admissions). In addition, while this literature focuses mostly on the supposed benefits of competition (Agmon, 2022), we zoom in on competition's moral problems.⁵ Take Christoph Lütge's *The Ethics of Competition: How a Competitive Society is Good for All* (2019). While he does discuss the ethics of competition beyond markets, including competition in education, health care, politics and our day-to-day lives, he presents an overly optimistic picture of competition's benefits for most, if not all of us. As will become clear in section 5, we take issue with Lütge's optimistic stance and argue why we need less rather than more competition in key societal domains.

As such, we aim to remedy the overall tendency of ignoring or downplaying the moral problems of competition (see, for example, Heath, 2014, p. 103) and to warn against introducing competitions because of their supposed benefits, while overlooking their downsides. Importantly,

5 In *Ethics for Adversaries* (1999), Arthur Isak Applbaum mostly focuses on how *individuals* should behave within adversarial institutions without addressing the moral desirability of these institutions themselves. In our paper, we ask specifically whether and when competitive *institutions* are morally problematic.

we do not aim to provide an all-things-considered ethical evaluation of competition – whether any given competition is justified overall – as this would require weighing off all relevant reasons for and against, which falls beyond the scope of our paper. Instead, we aim to identify and analyze what we take to be the main reasons against competition, to show that they are distinctive of competition (section 4) and to discuss their normative status and implications (section 5).

Our paper builds on Waheed Hussain’s efforts to identify what is morally problematic about competition (Hussain, 2018, p. 570; 2020, p. 80). Hussain asks the following question: “Does the fact that a substantially engulfing arrangement is [competitive] count as a moral defect” (2020, p. 87)? We agree with him that the answer is ‘yes’. Instead of disagreeing with his main claim – that competitions pit people against each other, which gives reasons for what he calls ‘estrangement’ – we argue that it does not provide a full picture of competition’s distinctive moral problems. So instead of criticizing Hussain’s ‘Estrangement Account’ (Hussain 2018; 2020), we incorporate his insights into our broader ‘Harm Account’ of competition.

In our view, the harms competition predictably generates not only include estrangement (section 4.3) but also substantial psychological, emotional (section 4.1) and opportunity costs (section 4.2). Eventually, we argue that these harms give us *pro tanto* reasons against distributing substantially engulfing competitions (section 5). But first, what do we mean by ‘harm’?

4 A harm account of competition

The main claim of our ‘Harm Account’ is that competitions predictably impose (morally problematic) *harms* on participants. Our understanding of the term ‘harm’ builds on Joel Feinberg’s influential definition of harm as a *setback to interests* (Feinberg, 1990, p. x), which suits the purposes of our paper well.⁶ 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

6 For reasons of space, we cannot go into the huge literature on what exactly constitutes ‘harm’. For an overview of different conceptions of harm, see de Villiers-Botha (2020).

languishes as they flourish or languish” (Feinberg, 1987, p. 25). Feinberg distinguishes two types 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).

Feinberg’s notion of harm is helpful, because it is broad enough to capture the negative consequences of competition (to be explained in section 4), but also narrow enough to exclude minor inconveniences. One is not harmed when one simply stubs one’s toe against a door or feels stressed before a presentation; one is harmed when one’s more ulterior and welfare interests are set back. This is why we focus on substantially engulfing competitions, rather than on low stakes board games or amateur sports, and argue that such competitions predictably thwart people’s interests in fundamental things like recognition and financial security.

On Feinberg’s account, harm – 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). In other words, a ‘setback to interests’ implies comparing one situation to another. We argue that this comparison can be understood in a temporal and in a counterfactual sense.

A *temporal* understanding of setback to interests involves comparing before and after an intervention. In the competition for a job, a grant or a college admission, for instance, a temporal approach understands harm as the setback of applicants’ interests over time, due to the competition running its course. Or, as a non-competitive example, imagine someone punches you in the face. A temporal understanding of harm simply compares (the degree to which) your interests (are satisfied) before and after this intervention.

The second understanding is *counterfactual* and involves comparing a competitive to a non-competitive arrangement (like a lottery, where chance determines the distribution of scarce goods) and the extent to

which both promote (or thwart) the interests of relevant parties. On this understanding, one is harmed by an intervention when one predictably fares worse in promoting one's interests compared to a scenario where this did not occur. Someone punching you in the face and setting back your interests (for example causing pain and generating medical bills) is harming you because you would have been better off in a counterfactual situation where this event is absent.

In sum, while the harms remain the same, the 'temporal' and 'counterfactual' distinction offers a useful tool to identify harms, as it offers two points of comparison to determine when interests are set back: compared to the situation before the event occurred (temporal) or compared to a hypothetical scenario in which the event did not occur (counterfactual).

In what follows, we argue that competitively organized substantially engulfing institutions generate harms, on both these understandings, as they inevitably thwart the (welfare and/or ulterior) interests of at least some participants. Comparing competitive to non-competitive arrangements (lotteries or allocation mechanisms based on need⁷, seniority, first-come-first, et cetera) is key to understanding what makes the former distinctly morally problematic. Each of these arrangements inevitably excludes some people from access to the scarce goods at hand but does so on different grounds (one's performance, whether one is lucky, needy or has the right age or position in a queue, et cetera). So, what makes competition distinctively harmful is not simply that losers are excluded from access to important goods but that the way it decides who is excluded predictably brings about substantial psychological and emotional costs (section 4.1); substantial opportunity costs (section 4.2); and estrangement (section 4.3). These harms or setbacks to people's interests are specifically due to competition and can be avoided by non-competitive arrangements. We elaborate on these harms below.

4.1. Psychological and emotional costs

Participants of competitions put themselves on the line, (potential) winners and losers alike. Competitions, which are basically comparisons

⁷ To be clear, needs-based allocation mechanisms take *neediness* as an allocation criterion, *not performance*. They operate by identifying who needs the goods at stake the most (following certain criteria) and allocates those goods accordingly. While one can obviously organize competitions to distribute goods that people in fact (desperately) need (think of jobs that are key in attaining financial security and social recognition), our aim is to show why this is morally problematic.

of judged performances, 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 unfavorably in comparison to others, so it is in our interest to avoid it. 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).⁸ Take, for example, empirical findings that college students who perceive their classes as competitive are more at risk of developing anxiety and depression (Posselt & Lipson, 2016) or that first-generation students experience higher levels of cortisol, more negative emotions and greater feelings of being an impostor when exposed to “notoriously competitive STEM courses that often pit students against each other” (Canning, et al., 2019, p. 647).

Losers of high-stake competitions are typically confronted with negative judgement. 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 North-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 society, Kohn adds, the more we internalize losing as *being* a loser (Kohn, 1992, p. 109). While *all* participants might experience the *fear* of failure (cf. Kohn, 1992, p. 109), losers, contrary to winners, may actually feel ashamed about the outcome. Shame, after all, is a strong negative emotional response to the “devaluation by others” (Cavanagh & Allen, 2007; Sznycer, et al., 2016). Those who lose a competition experience a setback to their interests in the temporal sense. Competition inevitably brings about a group of ‘losers’ who, in virtue of competition’s social and comparative nature, are made to feel ashamed of their losing.

⁸ Note how we use the results of empirical studies in this paper. Instead of taking those as providing conclusive evidence for the (size of) harms that competitions cause, we think they illustrate that the harms we identify *can* and in fact *do* occur when competitions are organised and thus that our conceptual and normative claims about competitions are not merely theoretical or tentative in nature.

In short, all participants in substantially engulfing competitions have an interest in winning the scarce good in question but also in avoiding the psychological and emotional costs that come with losing from others. As such, competitions inevitably generate setbacks of interests amongst the ‘losers’ and thus impose harms on them. After having lost a competition (temporal understanding) or in comparison to not having to compete (counterfactual understanding), these people are not only excluded from important scarce goods but they are excluded *because they were deemed not good enough*. While the exclusion is not distinctive of competition, this message and the psychological and emotional costs it predictably generates are. As these costs thwart people’s (ulterior and welfare) interests and have substantial negative impact on people’s mental and physical health and emotional stability (Dickerson, 2008, pp. 1370-1372), they constitute (psychological and emotional) harms. These harms can quickly grow significant, especially when people lose out in multiple competitions over time. Just imagine the harms to your self-esteem of not being able to land a job or get admitted to a college, time after time after time.

At the same time, we acknowledge the empirical evidence in support of a positive correlation between competition and self-esteem (Gilabert, 2023), emancipation and empowerment (Streetman & Heinrich, 2023), self-confidence (Banerjee, Gupta & Villeval, 2020; Neves, et al., 2023), feeling in control (Neves, et al., 2022), and emotions like joy, serenity, pride and hope (Martinent, Campo & Ferrand, 2014). While these positive effects can indeed occur (for instance, in sports contests), our argument that high-stake competitions come with harms still stands (especially if the benefits just mentioned can also be achieved in ways that do not involve ‘beating’ others and generating ‘losers’). When comparing competitions with lotteries, it becomes clear that the latter pose no social evaluative threats as they don’t expect people to put themselves on the line. Winning a lottery doesn’t grant any special recognition: the goods distributed may have (im)material benefits but winning itself does not generate those. Similarly, losing a lottery doesn’t come with stigmatization, shame, anxiety and other threats to (self-)esteem and (self-)respect. In contrast, what matters in competitions is winning, i.e. achieving a status that others recognize. Whatever the reward is of some competition (a job, a grant, a medal), its value at least in part depends on the fact that it can only be won *through* a competition. Compared to winning a lottery, there is more (positional) value in winning a competition, as the

(socially scarce) status of ‘victor’ comes with prestige and self-esteem, because it reflects people’s performances.

Again, we recognize that esteem and a sense of pride are arguably also what makes competition attractive, compared to a lottery, where one might experience no sense of accomplishment, pride or control over crucial things in life. These considerations matter in the overall evaluation of the practice at hand (see sections 5 and 6). Note that when a competition is replaced with a (partial) lottery, winners will feel less entitled. This might be a good thing, especially when competitions are tight and the difference between those who *just* won and those who *just* lost is largely arbitrary, as often happens in the competitive distribution of jobs, research funding or college admissions (see Bol, de Vaan & van de Rijt, 2017).

But what about allocation mechanisms with a fixed performance threshold, where those who meet this threshold obtain the scarce good (or enter into a lottery to determine who does)? Here, participants are also evaluated on their performances and risk failing to meet this bar. Is there something distinctly harmful about *losing from* and thus *being evaluated unfavorably in comparison to others*, compared to *failing to meet a fixed threshold*?⁹ Arguably, failing to meet the fixed threshold can be as harmful as losing from someone else.¹⁰ Of course, there can be emotional and psychological costs involved in not being deemed good enough ‘in absolute terms’. However, the difference is that, with a non-competitive, fixed performance threshold, each participant has a clear pathway to success. While failing to meet this bar can be painful, you know what you need to do to reach it and you can stop worrying once you do. In a competition, there is always the salient risk that others will outdo you, in which case you fall behind (again), with all the psychological pressures on your emotional wellbeing that come with this stress.

Take a driving exam as an example of a fixed performance threshold. During the exam, you need to demonstrate having acquired relevant knowledge and skills. Repeatedly failing to meet this fixed threshold can be demotivating and give your self-esteem a beating, harms that should be taken seriously. However, you have a clear pathway to success, and

9 If the scarce good is really fixed-sum – where there are not enough rewards for the people who meet the threshold – one could use a variation of this example where those who meet the (demanding) performance threshold enter a lottery. Either way, the question remains the same: is *losing from someone else* worse than *not meeting a threshold*?

10 We thank an anonymous reviewer for pushing us on this point.

you know what to improve to pass the exam the next time. Now, imagine driving licenses being handed out on a competitive basis. Compared to the fixed performance threshold, this would come with specific harms to people's psychological and emotional wellbeing. Stress arises from the fact that one's performance will only be deemed 'good enough' if others do worse.

As 'social evaluative threat' arises in "performance contexts" where "the self could be negatively judged by others" (Dickerson, 2008), non-competitive arrangements that do not revolve around performances avoid it. While fixed performance thresholds can generate social evaluative threat as well, the uncertainties and stress that with having one's performances compared to those of others, is distinct to competition.

Note that a competition's *winners* too can suffer psychological and emotional costs as they face substantial pressures to remain competitive and successful. Stress and anxiety may occur *in anticipation* of social evaluation and comparison (Craw, Smith & Wetherell, 2021) and knowing that one has to compete (Kohn, 1992, p. 109). The longer a competition lasts or the more one has to compete, the more likely it becomes 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). After winning a competition for a prestigious job, for example, one is incentivized to compete for a promotion, and so on. Likewise, after winning a prize or a grant, the competition does not stop: there are always more prizes and grants to win. After getting admitted to a prestigious university, there are honors programs and traineeship programs one can apply for to increase one's competitive edge on the job market. As those at the top have a lot to lose (in terms of standing, for example), they have to keep performing, with ever-rising standards of excellence. Proponents of competitions may respond that psychological and emotional costs are part of the game and that people should 'just get over it'. While such a response is justified in the case of a friendly game of scrabble, it is too harsh in the case of substantially engulfing competitions. Such competitions are not just a game. Important goods are at stake, such as financial and job security, education and the social bases of self-respect. The psychological and emotional costs incurred on losers and winners are real and losers should not be blamed for being overly sensitive.

4.2. Opportunity costs

The second type of harm inflicted by substantially engulfing competitions relates to the opportunity costs they impose on participants. Competitors are incentivized to invest time, effort and other resources to do whatever is needed to win, which they could have spent on things they value, such as spending time with friends and family, reading a novel or actually *doing* their work rather than having to showcase how good they are at their job.¹¹

On a temporal understanding of harm, all competitors typically invest large amounts of time, effort and resources when competing. While this pays off for winners, it does not for losers who are worse off than they were before. Not only do they continue to be excluded from the scarce and important goods at stake, the time, money and resources they spent on competing and improving their chances of winning are lost. While losers can learn valuable things in the process, substantial opportunity costs imply that their ulterior interests are set back. Since people have good reasons to want both decent jobs and meaningful activities beyond work, for example, the time and effort people spend on improving their competitive edge on the job market and the work floor, means they lose out in other important respects.

Competitions also harm losers on a counterfactual understanding. Compare competitions, again, to lotteries, needs-based arrangements or fixed performance thresholds. While each allocation mechanism excludes some people from access to goods, it uses a different criterion: performance, luck, need, et cetera. Except for buying a ticket, lotteries don't require any investments to improve one's chances or to outcompete others to try and win. Since luck determines who wins, they do not incentivize participants to put in additional time and effort. Lotteries, and this also holds for needs-based arrangements, do not impose the opportunity costs that competitions generate. Even non-competitive fixed performance thresholds fare better in this respect, since they do not incentivize parties to participate in a (wasteful) rat race. Sure, participants need to invest time, effort and other resources to meet the threshold but, in contrast to competitions, additional investments yield

11 We acknowledge that this is also precisely what makes competition so attractive; it incentivizes people to develop their capacities. We do not deny this. In this paper we do not make any evaluative judgements about whether a specific competition should be organized *all things considered*, and how. We merely aim to identify what it is, exactly, that makes competition morally problematic at a conceptual and normative level.

no (additional chances of) rewards. One can simply stop investing once the threshold has been met, whereas competitions, which crucially compare different people's performances, incentivize each participant to get and stay ahead of others.

Again, note that winners incur these opportunity costs as well. This is an important lesson from the literature on positional competition (as already alluded to in section 2). In the rat or arms race for competitive advantage, competitors need to invest an increasing amount of time, effort and money in their attempts to keep up with or outcompete others. Everyone individually has an interest in advancing, but if every participant puts increasing efforts into improving their relative position, nobody's relative position changes. As such, positional competitions lead to (social) waste (Frank, 2007; 2011). As Fred Hirsch put it, "[i]f everyone stands on tiptoe, no one sees better" (1999, p. 5).¹²

Grant competitions in academia provide a poignant example of how opportunity costs add up. A study about Australia's competitive grant allocation system estimated that the 3.727 applicants who applied for a grant at the National Health and Medical Research Council in 2012 spent a total of 550 working years on their proposals. Given that 20,5% of the applicants were successful, around four centuries of work were wasted (Herbert, Barnett & Graves, 2013). This is time that researchers could have spent on actually doing research and advancing science.

When the opportunity costs of competing are substantial – as they are in substantially engulfing competitions for important scarce goods – they amount to harms. On a temporal understanding, vast amounts of time, energy and resources are lost at both the individual and the collective level. Or, to put it in more extreme terms, competition creates the perfect conditions for a kind of quasi-voluntary *self-exploitation*. While no one is *forced* to work long hours; competitive labor markets and work floors do incentivize people to do exactly this, just to keep up with the rest. Reflecting on his interviews with American youth who experienced upward social mobility, Richard Sennett puts it as follows:

¹² Competition is typically associated with efficiency, while this paper focuses on the inefficiencies caused by competition. The reason why competition can be both, efficient and inefficient, is because they are based on two different conceptions of competition. The first one involves *market competition*, where supply and demand interact through the price system; it promotes the efficient use of resources and generates economic growth. The pie gets bigger. This is *not* how we understand competition in our paper. The second conception of competition, *positional competition*, informs our definition and our arguments throughout the paper.

[W]e were puzzled by what we had heard; if people felt life was a rat race, and they had enough to get by, why keep running? What we learned to hear was an assumption behind the complaints of getting nowhere: if a person feels as though *he* is running – even if he has been made to run – and he fails to win, to quit racing is humiliating. [...] it’s up to [them] that they aren’t making the most of their new position in society. Inadequacy in this situation serves as a spur to self-discipline rather than revolt. (Sennett & Cobb, 2023, p. 180)

This quote not only alludes to the psychological and emotional costs mentioned earlier (losing and quitting are both humiliating), but also to opportunity costs: one keeps running despite ‘getting nowhere’. Rather than revolting against structural inequalities, competitions for social advantage that are typically justified in meritocratic or ‘neoliberal’ terms hold individuals responsible for their position in the resulting hierarchy. More effort, hard work and self-discipline are required to overcome one’s inferior position. This point connects to the broader literature on (the myth of) meritocracy, where authors like Sandel (2020) worry that meritocratic competitions (even when fair) incite hubris among the winners, while losers only have themselves to blame for their failure.¹³

On a counterfactual understanding of harm, other distribution mechanisms do not generate this kind of waste. Consider grant allocations again. Instead of organizing wasteful competitions, research money can be distributed equally or randomly amongst a group of established and interested researchers. In both non-competitive systems, one can simply ask researchers who qualify (after having passed a fixed performance threshold, for example) whether they are able and willing to participate and divide the money evenly across that group or use a lottery.¹⁴ Both systems avoid the substantial opportunity costs that come with competitive procedures (especially when success rates are low), which not only require researchers to spend their time developing, writing and finetuning proposals, but also involve huge administrative costs for reviewers and panels who need to assess and rank contenders (Roumbanis, 2024; Schweiger, et al., 2024).

13 Again, we thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting making the connection with the literature on (the myth of) meritocracy.

14 Philipps (2022) discusses some real-life examples of and arguments in favor of lotteries in this context.

4.3. *Estrangement*

Besides psychological/emotional and economic costs, competitions also predictably generate harms that are social in nature. To explain how competitions harm (valuable aspects of) social relationships, we first reconstruct the Estrangement Account that Waheed Hussain has developed in his paper *Pitting People Against Each Other* (2020) and then incorporate it into our broader Harm Account.

According to Hussain, institutions mistreat people not only when they infringe on their rights and freedoms or treat them unfairly, but also when they pit people against each other. So, apart from the fundamental principles of liberty and equality (or fairness), Hussain proposes another principle that should govern the demands of political morality: the principle of community (Hussain, 2020, pp. 79-80). Competitive substantially engulfing institutions are “morally defective” (2020, p. 87), Hussain argues, because/when they estrange members of a (political) community from each other, which leads to a worrisome failure in solidarity.

Hussain (2020, p. 87) takes a hypothetical Physics Department as a model for thinking about competition in a liberal democracy. We adjust his example slightly for our purposes. Imagine the department has two tenure-track assistant professors, *A* and *B*, but due to the scarcity of its financial resources, only one of them can get tenure. Tenure scheme 1 (“S1”) requires them to reach a fixed performance threshold, understood in terms of contributing to their respective field. If *A* and *B* both manage to pass the threshold, a coin toss will determine who gets the position. Here, each has an independent ‘pathway’ to meet the criteria, after which luck determines their fate. Under tenure scheme 2 (“S2”), however, the position goes to whoever performs *better than the other*, that is, whose contribution to their field is *bigger*. So here, there is only one ‘pathway’ to tenure; *A* can only get it if they beat *B*, and vice versa. In both schemes, one can assume both to have a 50% chance of becoming tenured (cf. Hussain, 2020, p. 87).

According to Hussain, there is something distinctly morally problematic about S2 (Hussain, 2020, p. 87). To realize their aspirations under S2, *A* needs to formulate and carry out a plan that impedes *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 competitive arrangements like S2 pit *A* and *B* against each other *by design*, they create powerful reasons for both to think and act with disregard for one another. Moreover, because tenure track schemes involve important goods and are thus substantially engulfing arrangements, the competitive character of S2 is morally defective (Hussain, 2020, p. 88).

Now compare S2 to S1, where both *A* and *B* might or might not meet the fixed threshold. Here too, both can experience feelings of envy, jealousy and disregard towards each other. Crucially though, S1’s design does not actively incentivize people to gain competitive advantage over the other and thus to behave strategically toward each other. *A*’s efforts to meet the threshold do not hamper *B*’s efforts to do so. The only thing each can do is pass the threshold themselves and hope for the best. This changes people’s attitudes and the social dynamics between them: they can regard each other as fellow candidates for the same job instead of seeing each other as direct opponents to beat. In contrast, competitions trigger the kind of strategizing, antagonism, distrust and even sabotage that harms (often invaluable) social relationships.

The insight that competitions create powerful reasons to disregard each other, provides the basis for Hussain’s Estrangement Account (Hussain, 2020, pp. 94-98). People in a (political) community 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).¹⁵

We fully agree with Hussain in this regard and believe his account can be easily incorporated into our Harm Account, as one’s (welfare) interests are predictably set back when a climate is created where people no longer give each other’s successes and failures the appropriate role in their practical reasoning. The estrangement that arises when competitions pit people against each other thus constitutes harm (in the temporal and counterfactual sense), as it thwarts people’s capacity to establish meaningful social relationships, maintain friendships and sustain a (political) community.

Estrangement generates harm in the temporal sense because competition leads people to disregard one another. *Before* it takes place, the scarcity of goods that everyone has reasons to want can go hand in

¹⁵ 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).

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. A competitive arrangement, however, actively incentivizes people to behave strategically and disregard or even resent one another, as this is needed to gain competitive advantage, resulting in damaged relationships after the competition has run its course.

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, i.e. 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, competition leads to a fragmented workforce where 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 shared identity, both of which are needed to promote the workers' shared interests in decent working conditions (Duke, Bergmann & Ames, 2010).

On the counterfactual sense of harm, people would not have strong reasons to disregard one another if non-competitive arrangements were chosen, even though the rewards in question remain scarce (think of a desirable job, a spot at a prestigious university, or a grant). Just compare S1 with S2 in Physics Department. Again, estrangement is 'baked into' the basic setup of competitive arrangements.

5 *Pro tanto* reasons against competition

What are the normative implications of our claim that substantially engulfing competitions predictably and distinctively generate these three types of harms? In this section, we argue that these harms constitute strong *pro tanto* reasons not to distribute important goods competitively. Let us first provide an overview of our claims so far.

Table 1 Harms that competition brings about

| Conceptions of harm Types of setbacks | Temporal (comparing before and after competing) | Counterfactual (comparing competitive and non-competitive arrangements) | |
|--|---|---|---|
| | | Lottery | Fixed performance threshold |
| 1. Psychological and emotional costs | Self-esteem is under threat, stress and anxiety increases | No one's self-esteem is on the line; no stress or anxiety about unfavorable comparisons | Judgements in light of fixed threshold, not in comparison to others |
| 2. Opportunity costs | Investments are wasted | No investments are made; allocation based on luck | Investments are made, but no spiraling into a rat race |
| 3. Estrangement | Participants are pitted against each other | Participants are not pitted against each other | Participants are not pitted against each other |

Given that substantially engulfing competitions impose harms on participants, we argue that there are *pro tanto* reasons not to distribute important goods competitively. 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). For instance, a joke being funny provides a *pro tanto* reason to tell it to others, but when it is also insulting, there is also a *pro tanto* reason not to tell it. Whether we have sufficient reason to tell this joke, all things considered, depends on which *pro tanto* reason is stronger. Stronger *pro tanto* reasons can override or defeat weaker reasons (Alvarez, 2017).

When it comes to substantially engulfing competitions, the harms we have identified provide *pro tanto* reasons not to organize them. These reasons against organizing such competitions are self-standing and carry moral weight without providing knock-down arguments or overall judgements. Organizing such competitions, then, is impermissible, not *per se* or *simpliciter*, but in the absence of stronger justificatory reasons in favor of organizing them. Whether a given competition for specific goods in specific circumstances is morally permissible – or even desirable – all things considered is then not an all or nothing matter, nor will it depend on some aggregation of pluses (advantages) and minuses

(disadvantages). Instead, it depends on the strength of different justificatory reasons for or against implementing it. We may, for example, have reasons to organize the labour market competitively that may (or may not) be stronger than our reasons for avoiding the harms that this arrangement predictably inflicts on its losers.

Our aim has been to identify the *pro tanto* reasons against substantially engulfing competitions, without settling the debate on their overall permissibility or desirability. Proponents of competitions can claim that our reasons against can be easily outweighed by the benefits that arise when scarce important goods are allocated to people best positioned to make socially valuable use of those goods, at least in domains of employment and education. We discuss two ways in which proponents can make this point and provide responses to each.

First, proponents can stress that competitions (for jobs, grants or medals), as we have acknowledged, create value that lotteries do not create, such as the desirable status of ‘winner’ and the esteem and prestige that comes with it. While those are indeed benefits generated by competitions, they do not prevent the harms that we have identified and that need to be weighed off against those harms. Attempts to win such competitions also come with psychological, economic and social costs. The fact that winners gain prestige and esteem, for example, does not mean that losers do not suffer from disappointment, stress, loss of (self-esteem) and a waste of time and energy.

Second, Christoph Lütge recognizes that competition unavoidably produces *prima facie* ‘losers’ but adds that it would be unhealthy for the system as a whole if there were no room for “creative destruction,” referencing Joseph Schumpeter. Just like companies need to be able to go bankrupt (Lütge, 2019, p. 25), those who cannot find or lose a job are disadvantaged for a while, until they find another job. These disadvantages are compensated for by a sufficiently competitive environment 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 organized by rules, competitions are desirable as their massive benefits almost always override whatever *pro tanto* reasons one might have against them (Lütge, 2019, p. 28).

We have two responses. First, we happily admit that – in certain circumstances, in some domains, for some goods – competitions can be justified and the *pro tanto* reasons against them are indeed outweighed by arguments in favor. Admitting this much is perfectly compatible with

claiming that these harms arise and should be taken into account. We hope to have identified the ‘losses’ competition predictably generates and argued why those are more widespread and serious than Lütge admits.

Second, an important reason why substantially engulfing competitions can lead to large beneficial results is that they are complemented by non-competitive arrangements that mitigate the harms inflicted. Take jobs again. Losing one’s job or failing to land one is harmful in all the senses explained before and can even lead to a vicious cycle where it becomes increasingly difficult to land a decent job in the future (Rigney, 2010, chapter 4). These harms are mitigated when social safety nets are in place. Social safety nets are important, regardless of the allocation mechanism in place, so regardless of the basis on which one is excluded from the scarce good (luck, seniority, et cetera). Those who miss out should not have to face adversity. Social safety nets ensure that unemployment doesn’t necessarily mean hardship. As such, they thus reduce the stakes of competition.

The importance of mitigating or avoiding competition’s harms, despite its social benefits, is also understood by Shai Agmon (2022). In his *Two Concepts of Competition*, he distinguishes between friction competition and parallel competition. Friction competition “is designed to facilitate a clash between competitors” (Agmon, 2022, p. 5), where basketball games and court cases are paradigmatic examples. Agmon notes that such competitions are less “stable” and therefore in need of “carefully constructed and monitored conditions” (2022, p. 27; see also Applbaum, 1999, p. 198).

One example could be that in friction competition we might have an additional duty of care to make sure that the competition is civilized and restricted, so that the harm inflicted on competitors is controlled (which could be manifested in different kinds of professional codes of ethics). This duty of care could justify external interference where friction competition is needed, not only for the sake of the social benefit but also to protect competitors from one another. (Agmon, 2022, pp. 27-28)

Parallel competition, in turn, “is designed to create separate pathways for each competitor wherein they can maximize their performance” (Agmon, 2022, p. 5). Here, athletic running races on tracks and

(perfect) markets are paradigmatic examples. According to Agmon, parallel competitions are “less confrontational” (2022, p. 27) than friction competitions competition but mostly leaves it at that. Importantly, our Harm Account also applies to parallel competitions. We have strong *pro tanto* reasons to avoid making comparative judgements, generating rat races and pitting people against each other, even when the rules stipulate that competitors remain ‘in their own lane’. While Agmon explicitly does “not scrutinize the justifications that underpin the use of competition as an institutional mechanism” or “discuss any proposal aimed at replacing competitive institutional designs with noncompetitive ones” (Agmon, 2022, p. 8), we have explicitly done exactly that.

In the following section, we formulate suggestions how to mitigate the harms of substantially engulfing competitions, thereby making it easier to justify them overall, despite the harms they incur.

6 The stakes and scope of competition

Now that we have discussed the main arguments why competitively distributing important scarce goods is morally problematic and interpreted those as *pro tanto* reasons against doing so, this section explores what determines the weight of those reasons. We argue that two aspects of competition (stakes and scope) make a specific competitive arrangement more or less problematic, i.e. more or less harmful to parties involved. The higher its stakes and the wider its scope, the *more morally problematic* a competition is, i.e. the more substantial its inflicted harms are and the stronger the *pro tanto* reasons are against organizing it. As stakes and scope increase, a competition becomes more engulfing and *stronger* justificatory reasons are needed to override these *pro tanto* reasons against it. In some cases, a competition can be justified only by lowering its stakes and/or reducing its scope. In other cases, important goods should not be distributed competitively at all. But let us first explain what we 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 its winners (like a salary when landing a job) and of the costs inflicted on its losers (like the lack of financial security and the resulting loss of self-esteem). In substantially engulfing competitions – such as the labor market and grant competitions – participants compete for goods that everyone has reasons to want. As such,

the stakes are high by definition. The higher these stakes, the graver the moral worries that a competition raises. A labor market with plenty of options to land a decent job, embedded in a social security scheme with generous unemployment benefits, is less worrisome than a labor market with only a few decent jobs and without social security to protect people against the hardships of unemployment. Similarly, an academic environment where obtaining big grants with low success rates is crucial for one's career has higher stakes than an environment where one's job status does not depend on one's success in acquiring prestigious grants.

Second, competition has a larger *scope*, the more widespread it is, i.e. the more practices are organized competitively and the more goods are distributed competitively. The larger a competition's scope, the larger the harms it generates 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 winners (or losers) gain (or lose) access to *more* goods. Take a world where one's performance in a competitive labor 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 organizing it.¹⁶ Scope in this sense can be reduced by breaking up this competition and organizing multiple competitions, each with a now smaller scope and with its own criteria for success. This helps to avoid success (or failure) in one competition from spilling over to other competitions.¹⁷ For instance, one can have a labor market that consists of many small-scale competitions for jobs, without any of these jobs giving access to excessive amounts of status, prestige and money.

Second, competition in general can have a large scope in a different sense as well. Imagine a hypothetical society in which basically

16 In theory, lotteries can also have a wide scope: winning a lottery in one domain of life can give you access to important goods in other domains as well. This is problematic in ways similar to a competition with a wide scope, except in the latter case, one's exclusion from vital goods in all these different domains of life is accompanied with the harms mentioned earlier.

17 The point about multiple competitions is inspired by Michael Walzer, who argues in his *Spheres of Justice* (1983) that society should avoid the tyranny of one societal sphere over other spheres.

everything is distributed on the basis of a multitude and a wide range of competitions, each with their own criteria to compare and rank performances. Imagine that even access to love gets distributed competitively. (This is perhaps less counterfactual than it seems, due to the increasing popularity of dating markets and apps.)¹⁸ Even if each specific competition is not subsumed under one high-stakes competition (for, say, jobs), one can plausibly claim that the scope of competition, more generally speaking, has increased. This scope would be reduced if people would no longer select romantic partners on the basis of their (perceived) ‘performances’. While a world with many (relatively low-stake) competitions encourages “people to value a mix of roles and goods” (Fishkin, 2016, p. 185) and everyone can be a ‘winner’ in some competition, and derive self-esteem from that, it might still be morally problematic, because there is hardly any space left where people (1) can be free from social evaluative threats, (2) are not incentivized to waste resources to keep up with or outcompete others and (3) can engage in shared projects without interfering with others who wish to do so as well.

In line with Hussain’s suggestion to keep competition within “the limits of an appropriately “friendly” or “civic” competition” (2020, p. 102), our Harm Account proposes to look for ways to reduce its harms by lowering its stakes and narrowing its scope. This can be done in two ways.

First, one can distribute some important goods – such as a minimal amount of money, medical care or education – non-competitively. Doing away with competitive arrangements for these goods is an obvious way of reducing their stakes and scope, i.e. bringing them all the way down to zero. Second, one can hold on to competitions for these goods but reduce the benefits for winners and/or mitigate the costs for losers. When it comes to health care, for example, 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 competitions, Fred Hirsch argues that we can, for example, lower the financial rewards for top positions (i.e. lower stakes) or increase the range of goods that are collectively provided and that

18 Imagine, for instance, that widely used dating apps would rank people’s performances and reward ‘winners’ by increasing their chances to get matched with potential partners. Even if the criteria involved would not play a role in other domains (think of child-rearing or love-making skills, for instance), this hypothetical society would be more competitive than ours and the scope of competition would be larger.

become independent of someone's relative income (i.e. reduce scope) (Hirsch, 1999; Matthews, 1977, p. 577).

When we consider the labor market again, one can implement progressive income taxes (much like implementing a ceiling), provide substantial unemployment benefits for that market's losers and/or provide an unconditional basic income that one receives independent from one's success or failures on that market (like implementing a floor). In our view, installing a solid floor matters most, morally speaking: the more robust social safety nets are, the smaller the harms a competitive labor market inevitably incurs on its losers. After all, stakes will be much lower if job seekers know they can live decent lives while looking for another job.

Implementing upper and lower constraints ensures that people's (lack of) success in competitive arrangements does not have all too serious implications for their opportunities and their (welfare and ulterior) interests, both of which each of us has good reasons to want. We thus endorse Hussain's strategy of lowering any given's competition's stakes, not only because that would reduce (reasons for) estrangement, but also because it would reduce the psychological, emotional and opportunity costs that such a competition predictably incurs.

7 Conclusions

Competition plays a central role in contemporary liberal democracies. And while it has many things going for it, it is crucial to think carefully and systematically about its moral problems. This holds a fortiori when it comes to high-stakes or, as Hussain calls them, "substantially engulfing" competitions (2020, pp. 85-86) for jobs, grants, promotions and (college) admissions, where the important goods at play include financial security, social standing, the social bases of self-respect and education.

In this paper, we have developed and defended our Harm Account of competition. We have argued that it is distinctive of competitions – compared to non-competitive arrangements – that they generate three types of harms: one psychological (psychological and emotional costs), one economic (opportunity costs) and one social in nature (estrangement). In competitions, people are forced to put themselves on the line, showcasing what they are (in)capable of and having their performances

evaluated, compared and ranked. Losers are excluded from important scarce goods because they are deemed ‘not good enough’. This not only threatens their well-being and sense of self-esteem and (self-)respect, it also predictably generates huge amounts of social waste, as competitions incentivize both losers and winners to ever increasing investments to keep up with or outdo others in a mutual arms race. In addition, as Hussain (2018; 2020) has already argued, competition pits people against each other by design and thus predictably harms social relationships.

These harms are distinctive of competition and constitute *pro tanto* reasons not to distribute scarce important goods competitively. The size of these harms and the weight of these *pro tanto* reasons depend on how high a competition’s stakes are and how wide its scope. Insofar as we value people being able (1) to develop their self-esteem and self-worth in ways that don’t require them to outperform and be ‘better’ than others, (2) to spend time in meaningful ways, also if that that doesn’t give them a competitive edge and (3) to engage in social relationships and communities, we have good reason to think twice before introducing competitions for important scarce goods or, when already in place, look for ways to lower their stakes and narrow their scope.

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