Competition and its tendency to corrupt philosophy

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Abstract

Competition plays a substantial and structural role in philosophy today. It is therefore remarkable that it has received little systematic ethical scrutiny in the literature until now. This paper aims to contribute to establishing a discussion about competition in the discipline of philosophy by arguing (i) that philosophy is not inherently competitive and (ii) that competition tends to corrupt the practice of philosophy.

Regarding (i), I argue that philosophy can best be understood as a cooperative endeavour. The idea that philosophy is a matter of competitive adversarial argumentation impedes philosophers from achieving what philosophy is all about, that is, realising what Alasdair MacIntyre calls 'internal goods': acquiring greater wisdom and knowledge and getting closer to the truth.

I then show that a lot of the competition that characterises today's practice of philosophy revolves around obtaining external goods, such as money, status, prizes and academic positions. While external goods are needed to sustain and regulate the practice of philosophy, competition for such goods also tends to *corrupt* the practice (ii), by which I mean that internal goods are seriously compromised. This, in turn, excludes prospective philosophers who are not 'competitive' enough, which is also a loss for philosophy generally.

Keywords

competition, cooperation, corruption, external goods, internal goods, philosophy

1. Introduction

Many aspects of today's philosophical discipline tend to be competitive. Trying to *win* an argument against *opponents* is common practice. Philosophers need to prove their professional worth in a publish-or-perish environment.[1] Universities, departments

[1] It could even be argued that the iconic Socrates would not meet today's academic standards (Ashmead 1995). For an overview of some problems with the 'publish-and-perish' system in

and individual academics compete for funding. And in high schools, competitive philosophy events such as Ethics Bowls and Philosothons gain popularity.[2] While competition plays a structural and substantial role in philosophy today, it has received little systematic ethical scrutiny in the literature until now (exceptions include Cohen 1995, Rooney 2010 and Hundleby 2021). This paper aims to contribute to establishing a discussion around competition in philosophy by arguing (i) that philosophy is not inherently competitive and (ii) that competition tends to corrupt the very practice of philosophy.

My paper proceeds as follows. First, I will provide a working definition of competition (Section 2), after which I will take a closer look at the practice of philosophy. I take issue with the dominant perception that philosophy is inherently competitive, including the argument-is-war metaphor. In response, I use Alasdair MacIntyre's (2007) conceptual tools to identify philosophy's cooperative aspects (Section 3) and show that obtaining philosophy's so-called 'internal goods' does not require competition (Section 4). Hence, philosophy as a practice is not inherently competitive.

I then examine the claim that the practice of philosophy needs to be *organised* and *regulated* competitively, regardless of whether competition is inherent to the practice (Section 5). I show that a lot of the competition that characterises today's practice of philosophy revolves around obtaining so-called 'external goods', such as money, status, prizes and academic positions. While external goods are needed to sustain and regulate the practice of philosophy, competition for such goods also has a tendency to corrupt this practice, that is, to compromise its internal goods in varying degrees. This, in turn, excludes those prospective philosophers who are not 'competitive' enough, thereby also excluding a variety of styles, methods, voices and critiques that are philosophical in nature and could move the discipline as a whole forward.

Finally, I conclude that, while competition fulfils an important regulative function within the practice of philosophy, how and to what extent we organise things competitively is open to change (Section 6). While there is room for competition in philosophy, it should not come at the cost of those things we deem valuable about and even indispensable to philosophy: being guided by genuine curiosity, learning

academic philosophy, see Davies and Fellapi (2017). For a more anecdotal story, see Weinberg (2017).

[2] See the promotional video for the *National High School Ethics Bowl* in the US (https://nhseb.unc.edu/). In the 2021 (online) edition, 35.000 students from 32 different states participate. See also promotional videos of Philosothon competitions in Australia (https://www.philosothon.net/) and the UK (https://philosothon.co.uk/).

philosophy for philosophy's sake and trying to obtain wisdom or come closer to the truth.

2. What is competition?

The first step of my argument is to spell out what I mean by 'competition'. While a distinct philosophical debate on the concept of competition is largely absent, there is some literature that critically analyses it (Cawston 2016; Douglas 2019; Gomberg 1995; Hussain 2018, 2020; Knight 1923; Kohn 1992; Lütge 2019; Rousseau 1755/1761; Thorbjørnsen 2019; Vickers 1995; Wolff 2002). Based on commonalities between these different contributions, I propose the following working definition:

> **Competition (working definition):** A practice is competitive when its rules (implicitly or explicitly) stipulate that scarce, mutually exclusive goods can only be obtained by those at the top of the ranking (the winners) at the expense of those lower down the ranking (the losers). The participants' positions on the ranking are based on their achievements, as specified by those rules.

Let me point out three aspects of this definition that will be particularly relevant in the sections to come. The first one is competition's *mutually exclusive* character. One party can only win the scarce good (such as a prize, status and fame) *at the cost of* others, the losers (or, the non-winners).

The second, but related, aspect is about the participants' *achievements*. Contrary to lotteries, where winning the (mutually exclusive) prize is purely based on luck, competition implies that one's position on the ranking is based on achievements, which are typically *perceived* as depending on one's efforts and abilities (Hayes 2012, pp. 51–53; Fishkin 2016, p. 32; Littler 2017; Sandel 2020). [3] Losing a competition involves the negative evaluation of one's achievements, which, in turn, has a tendency to threaten one's sense of self-esteem or self-worth (Neuhouser 2008; Rousseau 1755/1761; Wilkinson & Pickett 2018, pp. 17-18). You may start believing that you *are* a loser, especially if there is a lot at stake, for example when your SAT score

[3] I emphasise 'perceived' because luck plays a bigger role in determining the outcome of competitions than is often recognised. For example, 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 et al. 2019, p. 4). This paper, however, will not go into the issue of fairness and luck in relation to competition (to what extent competitions are unfair) but pursues another concern (to what extent competitions corrupt the quest for internal goods; more on this in Section 5).

determines your access to a prestigious university; only a sufficiently high score, relative to others, grants you this access.

While competitions *can* bring about positive net-outcomes (e.g. it can be fun and thrilling, it can motivate people to develop their talents, and it can stimulate economic growth), the mutually exclusive 'win-lose' aspect based on one's alleged achievements is a necessary characteristic of competition. It means that there inevitably will be a losing party that incurs some kind of disadvantage.

The third aspect to point out refers to competition's *rules*, which can be either constitutive or regulative in nature. For some practices, the competitive rules are part of what *constitutes* that same practice; '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 practice; and it stops being chess if one takes away the competitive rules. By contrast, the rules of other practices are *regulative* in nature. A regulative rule is meant 'to bring about a certain form of behaviour, and is satisfied if the behaviour matches the content of the rule,' such as, 'drive on the right hand side of the road' (Searle, 2010, p. 97). Competitive rules can regulate a practice, but the practice as such exists regardless of such rules. For example, I can engage in the practice of portrait painting, without having to do so competitively.[4] Likewise, as I will argue in the following sections, one can engage in philosophy and get better at it, both when competitive rules are present *but also when they are absent*. Put differently, I argue that competition is *not* constitutive to philosophy, but plays a regulative role *at best*.

3. The practice of philosophy

This section develops the next notion of my argument: philosophy as a practice. Alasdair MacIntyre offers us conceptual tools that will help us analyse and understand the practice of philosophy, including its so-called 'internal' and 'external goods'. Starting with 'practice', MacIntyre describes it 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

[4] One might respond that our human desire for recognition and having our individual (superior) merit confirmed by others, at least in some respects (Rousseau 1755/1761; Neuhouser 2008; Kolodny 2010), makes us susceptible to outperforming others competitively. However, the extent to which humans 'are' competitive and how this affects our practices is an empirical question that lies outside the scope of this paper. This paper focusses on (competitive) practices itself.

> appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 187, emphasis mine)

To illustrate, throwing a ball with skill is not a practice, but the game of American football is. Planting tubers is not a practice, but farming is. Again, bricklaying is not a practice, but architecture is (MacIntyre 2007, p. 187). Based on these examples, we can already recognise that philosophy, too, is a practice, while merely sharing your opinion about, say, abortion, without giving it any thought, is not.

In order to justify understanding philosophy as a practice, I need to unpack two important aspects of MacIntyre's definition, both of which are essential to any practice: cooperation and internal goods. I start off with the first one: the practice's *cooperative* aspect. While MacIntyre does not explicitly give a definition of 'cooperation', his work suggests that it refers to all participants sharing a common sense of what the rules, the purpose and standards of the practice are. This shared common sense has an important historical dimension where skills and knowledge have been passed on from one generation to the next (MacIntyre 2007, p. 190). When it comes to philosophy, there is clearly a common and shared history that revolves around ideas, skills and knowledge that are expressed in, for instance, books and articles. Sharing a common sense of what the rules and standards are goes beyond merely agreeing upon them as self-interested individuals; it is about a shared commitment and care for these rules and standards and their continuation. As philosophers, we place ourselves in a tradition and adhere to its standards in terms of writing style, topics, and canonical figures.

Let me illustrate this cooperative aspect with an oft-used example by MacIntyre: the practice of chess. What is interesting about this example is that chess is cooperative as well as competitive, but on different levels. Chess's competitive aspect is constitutive of the game; it is part of its rules and purpose that individual players try to win by checkmating the opponent. However, on a different but equally important level, chess as a practice can also be described as a cooperative venture. Various institutions and a community of chess-players are built around the game and together they continuously pass on and reinforce a set of shared and agreed upon rules. The game has been played and perfected over centuries, which requires the passing on of skills and knowledge from one generation to the next, for example, by chess clubs, tournaments, books, and, nowadays, a huge online chess community. So, the

practice's competitive and cooperative aspects do not need to be in conflict with one another but can very well go hand in hand.

In philosophy too, we can tease out the practice's cooperative aspect.

Philosophy (cooperation)

Philosophy has a long history of critical thinkers who passed on their knowledge and skills from one generation to the next. Not only did philosophical ideas and discussions around morality, aesthetics, epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of mind, political philosophy and logic evolve over time, also the ways of doing philosophy have changed. This all is a cooperative endeavour. In their attempts to come closer to the truth or acquire knowledge or greater wisdom, philosophers situate themselves in a certain tradition where they are influenced by other philosophers, and reflect on and respond to each other's work.[5] Crucially, this all happens while having a (more or less) shared understanding of what constitutes good philosophy and why and how to uphold its standards. [6] Moreover, philosophers acquaint students—potential future philosophers— with what is supposed to be good philosophising, given these commonly accepted standards.

One might argue that this focus on philosophy's cooperative aspects misrepresents philosophy as it ignores some of the latter's crucial competitive aspects. Just like chess, philosophy is essentially cooperative *and* competitive, but on different levels. In order to move the philosophical debate forward (i.e. get closer to truth or acquire more knowledge) philosophers must engage in a *battle of ideas* and challenge each other's arguments.

This argument-is-war metaphor dominates philosophy's self-image in numerous ways. One such way is language, where terms like 'arguing *against*', '*opponents*', '*adopting* and *defending* positions' and '*winning* and *losing* arguments' is common parlance (Rooney 2010, p. 211). But metaphors go beyond mere language; many things we *do* in arguing and the ways we perceive others and ourselves are structured by the

[5] My descriptions of philosophy aim to include both analytic and continental traditions, the latter having an extensive non-argumentative literature with more 'poetic' writers such as Lacan, Derrida and Heidegger (Miščević 2014).

[6] I am aware that what counts as 'good philosophy' is determined by contingent power structures that are rooted in history. I aim to keep my discussions of philosophy broad enough as to include non-Western ways of philosophy as well. African philosophies, for example, have a rich oral tradition where theories of human nature, moral agency, subjectivity, language and responsibility are communicated and debated through stories, rituals and art (Imbo 2002; Ali 2006; Ikuenobe 2018).

concept of war. We can actually lose or win arguments, because we conceive and experience these arguments as battles, so we act accordingly. I attack the opponent's position and I need to defend my own claims (Lakoff & Johnson 2003, pp. 4-6).

The argument-is-war metaphor within contemporary (largely 'analytic') philosophy fits within a broader Adversary Paradigm which 'demands aggressive opposition to other people's opinion' (Hundleby 2021). Arguments go through a process of competitive, deductive reasoning where philosophers are expected to find counterexamples to the claims made by the opponent. Opposing views serve as a test, and surviving confrontation grants objectivity to a view; it brings us one step closer to the truth. Winning an argument therefore means the defeat of competing positions based on faults identified in them (Hundleby 2021; Moulton 1983). The prototypical philosopher who fits within this paradigm is an argumentative, competitive, rational and neutral thinker, who battles aspects of unreason, passion, instinct, nature and the body (Hundleby 2021; Rooney 2010).

Opposition, argumentation, aggression and war are of course not synonymous to competition. However, within the Adversary Paradigm, these terms cluster together and form the conceptual frame through which philosophy is understood and shaped. This paper flags the danger of the Adversary Paradigm *as a paradigm* (cf. 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. This paper, instead, argues that acquiring wisdom and knowledge and getting closer to the truth—MacIntyre calls them 'internal goods'—is pre-eminently a cooperative endeavour; and sticking to the Adversary Paradigm falsely creates the belief that such 'internal goods' can only be realised competitively. The following section will look into this notion of 'internal goods' and contrast it with 'external goods'.

4. 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). So cooperation, as explained in the previous section, is needed to realise the practice's *internal goods*—the second element of 'practice' that requires unpacking. This section identifies philosophy's internal goods and explains why they can only be obtained cooperatively. I will then contrast internal with *external goods*. Even if one recognises that philosophy is not inherently competitive and that its internal goods can only be obtained

collaboratively, one might still argue that competition for external goods—such as status, prestige, prizes, grants, and tenure track positions—is needed to sustain the practice of philosophy. While this is arguably true, I will contend that it becomes problematic when external goods come to play a central role within the practice of philosophy.

Let me start with 'internal goods'. This layered term refers to those things that are inextricably (rather than contingently) connected to a practice. MacIntyre explains this by means of examples of various practices, one of which 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: 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 that 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, then, is one practitioners discover through the practice itself. In the case of painting, this refers to what painters discover while pursuing excellence. This second type of internal good can only be obtained by living out a bigger or smaller part of your life *as a portrait painter* and can only be (fully)

experienced and understood by participating in the practice itself (MacIntyre 2007, pp. 189-190). While MacIntyre does not give concrete examples of what it exactly is that the practitioners discover, I interpret it 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 us apply these insights to the practice of philosophy.

Philosophy (internal goods)

A good internal to the practice of philosophy is the increased understanding of the world as expressed in papers, books, lectures, and other ways of conveying and passing on such ideas. This requires the capacity to balance reason and emotion; writing and presentation skills; the ability to listen to others; a curiosity and drive to get closer to the truth and acquire greater 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. In their quest for a deeper understanding of the world and acquiring truth and wisdom, philosophers need the insights, support and guidance of others. Reading the work of present and past philosophers, discussing ideas with colleagues, and receiving and giving feedback, can be frustrating, insightful and satisfying experiences, and eventually lead to more nuanced and better-founded visions you wouldn't have had if you hadn't participated in the practice of philosophy.

The foregoing shows that realising philosophy's internal goods is pre-eminently a cooperative endeavour. Collaboration is needed to gain a more sophisticated understanding of ourselves and the world and reflect critically on what matters. Adhering to the argument-is-war metaphor misleadingly represents philosophy as being about *winning* arguments and defeating one's *opponent*, while a good philosopher is happy to be mistaken if someone else's insight leads to more knowledge and understanding. Alternative metaphors such as, argument-as-art or

argument-as-quest do better justice to philosophy's collaborative aspect.[7] The argument-as-art metaphor, for example, helps us conceive of arguments as a process of creation, where the focus is on crafting an aesthetically pleasing work. It is less about proving the other wrong than about contributing something original to already existing works. Statements such as 'his words are *well crafted*' and 'her ideas gave us a *new perspective*' would fit with this metaphor. The argument-as-quest metaphor, in turn, puts more emphasis on the search itself, rather than winning at the expense of the other. 'We *explore* different conceptions' and 'we are *looking for* the best approach' would fit with this metaphor.

However, while philosophy is not *inherently* competitive—on the contrary, realising its internal goods is pre-eminently a cooperative endeavour—one might still argue that competition for *external goods* is needed to sustain the practice of philosophy.

'External goods' is another one of MacIntyre's important terms, which 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. Other examples of such contingent external goods are money, prestige and status (MacIntyre 2007, pp. 188-190).

Apart from their contingent connection to practices, external goods are typically also someone's *possession* and they are *mutually exclusive* (or 'rival', as economists would call it). The more status and power I 'possess' or have, the less others have. Likewise, the more money I possess, the less your money is worth, relatively speaking.[8] So, while internal goods benefit a whole community (e.g. everyone can enjoy and learn from an excellent paper), external goods only benefit a few, at the expense of others. One person performing well according to relevant parameters (such as, publishing more papers than others) means that that person rises in the competitive status hierarchy, which means that others are now 'lower', relatively speaking. According to

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[7] For more metaphor inspiration, see the blogpost *Metaphors we argue by* https://eight2late.wordpress.com/2011/03/22/metaphors-we-argue-by/

[8] Goods such as status, power and money are not only external but also *positional*, since their value largely depends on how they compare to others. Obtaining (more of) a positional good goes at the cost of those who have less of it, relatively speaking, since the (positional) value of these goods decreases accordingly. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the debate on positional goods, but more can be found in Hirsch (1999), Frank (1999, 2005, 2008, 2011), Brighouse and Swift (2006), Freiman (2014), Halliday (2016) and Ben-Shahar (2018).

MacIntyre (2007), 'External goods are therefore characteristically objects of competition in which there must be losers as well as winners' (pp. 188-190).

When looking at philosophy, we can identify several external goods.

Philosophy (external goods)

Goods external to the practice of philosophy include, for instance, money, status, and prestige. Where available funding is limited, some philosophers will competitively acquire more money at the expense of others, who inevitably receive less or nothing at all. But even if funding was equally distributed, social status and prestige are not. One philosopher's rise in status, power or prestige (e.g. due to having published a book) implies that others are now 'lower' on the ladder of status, power or prestige, relatively speaking.

Relevant for my analysis of the contemporary practice of philosophy is that competition 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 in order to stay ahead or, at least, keep up with the Joneses. If most colleagues have an *X* number of publications, then it is in your interest to have *X*+1 in order to have a leg up in the competition for external goods, such as grants, position and status, which, in turn, will allow you to keep doing the practice of philosophy. But given that everyone needs publications (amongst other things) to obtain these external goods, each and every individual will try to obtain an increasing number of publications. While the bar of what's regarded as a 'normal' number of publications rises for everyone, one's relative position on the (implicit or explicit) ranking remains the same. Only the top individuals reap the benefits (external goods), while everyone has to spend more time, energy and effort in publishing ever more.[9] This competition for external goods can come at the cost of actually engaging in the practice of philosophy itself, including the realisation of its internal goods, which is the topic of next section.

5. Corruption

Despite competition's tendency to push goods that are externally and contingently connected to a practice to the centre of attention, this does not mean we should nor could do away with competition altogether. The practice of philosophy also *needs*

[9] This rat race is extensively described in the literature on positional goods and positional competition. See previous footnote for some references.

external goods (such as money) to sustain itself and facilitate the obtainment of its internal goods. This means there is an eternal tension between the competitive quest for external goods on the one hand, and the practice's cooperative care for internal goods on the other. Put differently, there is an eternal tension between trying to achieve and sustain the MacIntyrean *ideal of the practice*, including its cooperative and internal aspects, and the empirical reality of the *contemporary practice* of philosophy as it needs to sustain itself materially.

After spelling out this tension within five different domains of professional philosophy, this section will explain what happens when this tension evolves into *corruption*. To illustrate, I provide three concrete scenarios where competition corrupts (i.e. seriously compromises the realisation of internal goods) the practice of philosophy. I end the section by proposing some pointers to indicate when competition has gone too far.

Let me start by elaborating on the tension as it plays out in the practice of professional philosophy. An important institution that houses this practice is the university. University funding (an external good) is necessary to pay the salaries of academic philosophers, buy books, laptops, coffee machines, and other things that facilitate the practice of philosophy and realise its internal goods. A large part of this funding is obtained competitively.

Now, let's have a look at five domains within professional philosophy—publishing, grant acquisition, job seeking, conferencing and teaching—to show how obtaining external goods is in tension with realising philosophy's internal goods.

Take publishing first. A competitive peer-review system helps philosophers improve their work and serves as an important quality check. In that sense, it can promote the realisation of internal goods. Importantly, however, getting work published also leads to status and prestige and increases one's chances of acquiring grants and jobs (all external goods). Since the value of one's publications is (partially) positional, every academic has an interest in having *more* publications than their colleagues. This rat race for ever more research output might, in turn, be in tension with realising the internal goods of philosophy.

Moving on to grant acquisition, funding for research is often project-based, which is distributed competitively.[10] With this funding, philosophers get the chance to execute their research project and realise philosophy's internal goods. This also means, however, that academic philosophers spend much of their time submitting funding applications that are needed to sustain the institution, and therefore their practices, which means that less time is left to actually do the practice of philosophy itself. Obtaining external goods tends to come at the cost of the internal goods that are appropriate to and constitutive of the practice of doing philosophy, such as doing critical and curiosity-driven research that gives us a better understanding of ourselves and the world, rather than focussing on those things that 'score' on funding application forms.

The same counts for the job market. Publications and grants give academics a leg up in the competition for jobs, which means they can continue doing what they love: philosophy. A competitive academic job market, however, runs the risk of incentivising something that *looks like* good philosophy by means of tokens like publication numbers or one's position in the academic hierarchy, rather than incentivising philosophy that is actually good (i.e. which aims to realise internal goods).

The domain of conferencing, in turn, is collaborative as well as competitive. It is collaborative in the sense that participants can share and work together on ideas to move the discipline forward; one can realise philosophy's internal goods together. However, due to the pressure to publish and acquire grants and jobs, philosophers might also hesitate to give valuable feedback to peers at conferences, thereby impeding the joint realisation of internal goods. Helping others to improve their chances of getting published and the benefits that go along with it, comes at the cost of one's own chances. Conferencing is also competitive in the sense that one's abstracts are selected on a competitive basis, giving some the opportunity to present their work and not others. Some conferences are even so prestigious that they confer status on participants (at the expense of others, who were not allowed to come).[11]

[10] See for example Bourguignon (2018) about the role of competitive research funding in science by the European Commission's European Research Council.

[11] Some conferences have a somewhat aggressively competitive atmosphere, but this is not my main concern here. Rather than focusing on people's subjective attitudes, I am interested in how competition *regulates* and *corrupts* the practice of philosophy.

Finally, teaching. While teaching is not a competitive in itself, the funding that is necessary for high-quality education is often based on student enrolments, student output, and other outcome-based models, so there is competition around who attracts the most students and who scores best on performance indicators (Dougherty & Natow 2016, p. 1). These indicators are used as proxies for measuring and rewarding 'outstanding education', which involves a competitive quest for external goods such as funding and recognition. However, the pressure to score well (or better than other universities) might not be in line with what good education is actually about, that is, education where students acquire the internal goods proper to philosophy. These internal goods might come under pressure with ever larger student groups and are not always easy to capture in performance indicators.

In sum, while competition for external goods is needed to sustain the contemporary practice of philosophy, it is also in tension with things worth caring about. Sometimes, however, the pendulum swings too far such that too much competition *corrupts* the practice itself.[12] By 'corruption' I mean the following:

> **Competition (corruption):** A practice is corrupted when competitively acquiring external goods seriously impedes the realisation of internal goods. Corruption comes in degrees. The more difficult it becomes to realise a practice's internal goods, the more morally problematic it is.[13]

Ideally, getting better at philosophy (i.e. realising its internal goods to larger extents) leads to greater success in competitions for grants and academic jobs. However, increasing competition means that external goods, rather than internal goods, come to play a central role. Competition for external goods is then not understood as merely instrumental to recognising and stimulating quality philosophy; it becomes philosophy's main goal, which is counterproductive to realising the internal goods of the philosophical practice. There are numerous examples of this. Let me provide three concrete scenarios within the context of philosophy where corruption takes place.

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[12] Cf. Michael Sandel's notion of 'corruption' in *What Money Can't Buy*, where he argues that marketisation is not a mere mechanism, nor a neutral way of regulating behaviour and organising practices. Instead, marketisation expresses and promotes values and attitudes people should adopt towards a practice, thereby pushing away the practice's moral and social (non-market) value (Sandel 2012, p. 9).

[13] One might argue that, as long as competitions are fair, there is nothing morally problematic about them. I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point. However, this paper argues that even fair competitions become morally problematic when they *corrupt* practices.

First, think of a research culture where academics write grant proposal after grant proposal, without really having the time to engage in philosophy itself (and acquire its internal goods). Or consider early career academics moving from post-doc to post-doc. Each year, they spend vast amounts of time and energy applying for the next short-term position or applying for the next research project, which leaves them with little time to do the research that will help them get a long-term or permanent job. In the Netherlands, for example, the national movement *WOinActie* warns universities and the government against flexible, short-term academic contracts: 'The consequence is that those who want to continue their research [are usually confronted with] a long period of uncertain working conditions with high performance pressure and work stress'.[14]

Secondly and relatedly, a narrow focus on quantitative outputs in the form of publication numbers, citations and grants largely determines a researcher's status and recognition and plays a decisive role in recruitment, promotion and tenured appointments. Given the high stakes in this 'publish-or-perish' environment, the competition for external goods may induce a high level of perceived publication pressure (Haven et al. 2019; Pacchioni 2018) and in extreme cases lead to fraud and other research misbehaviours (Fanelli 2009; Feenstra et al. 2021; Haven et al. 2019; Pacchioni 2018). Philosophers who would otherwise help others to develop their ideas in order to gain a better understanding of a topic now protect 'their' ideas to prevent others from benefitting from them in the competition for external goods. If such competition becomes the main goal of philosophy, it impedes the collaborative obtainment of the practice's internal goods: a deeper understanding of the world, better-founded visions, and greater wisdom.

Finally, in an environment where competitively obtaining external goods plays a central role, prospective philosophers who are not 'competitive' enough will likely be ignored or excluded. Those who do not meet the ideal of the prototypical successful philosopher—that is, a competitive, argumentative, neutral and rational thinker—will have difficulties entering the discipline and fitting in.[15] A lot of focus on competitively acquiring external goods complicates the inclusion of promising future philosophers who, for example, have a more collaborative and emotionally-informed style of philosophising that pays more attention to nuance and making small distinctions. Or

[14] https://woinactie.blogspot.com/p/the-consequences.html

[15] The ideal of the prototypical philosopher is shaped along the lines of gender, race and other group differences. See Iris Marion Young (2011), who speaks of hierarchies of privilege in contemporary societies more generally (pp. 201-209).

think of those whose genuine interest in a topic gets crowded out in an environment that puts too much emphasis on 'scoring' points needed to obtain external goods, rather than reflecting on what matters and understanding the world. Failing to think of the practice of philosophy in non-competitive terms and failing to organise it in non-competitive ways therefore also corrupts the practice of philosophy itself, as it excludes a variety of styles, methods, voices and critiques that are conducive to acquiring philosophy's internal goods and moving the discipline as a whole forward.

Based on these three scenarios, I propose three pointers that help determine whether corruption takes place: (i) adversarial language use, (ii) (mental) health issues, and (iii) homogeneity. Again, each of these pointers is gradual and it depends on the concrete situation whether the competitive pendulum has swung too far and to what extent the corresponding degree of corruption is concerning.[16]

(i) First, adversarial language use is an indicator of a corrupted practice. The fact that one speaks of philosophy as a publish-or-perish environment, for instance, is alarming. Moreover, understanding the practice mostly in terms of 'attacking or defending a position' and 'winning or losing an argument' is a sign that the practice might be corrupted, since internal goods are best realised cooperatively.

(ii) Second, where many practitioners are suffering from stress, fatigue, burn-out and related (mental) health issues, they cannot properly engage in the practice anymore. They might lose their curiosity and enthusiasm for philosophy itself, at the detriment of realising its internal goods.

(iii) Third, homogeneity within the practice of philosophy might be an indicator that the practice is corrupted. Homogeneity here refers to *the lack of different ways* in which philosophy is done and the *lack of variety in people* who engage in the practice. A practice is too competitive, for example, when the 'argument-is-war metaphor' is so dominant that it leads to the exclusion of people who cannot identify with this combative way of doing philosophy. A practice is too competitive, moreover, when success depends on whether one scores well on a narrow list of criteria (e.g. getting published in an elite set of top journals). In such cases, philosophers might be less

[16] These pointers might partially overlap and influence each other. For example, the language used within the practice of philosophy will have an impact on the variety of ways in which philosophy is practiced and vice versa. Moreover, some pointers might also have other causes, apart from or instead of competition. A lack of diversity, for instance, is the result of many interrelated factors. Given the complexity of the matter, my aims here is not to provide an exhaustive all explaining list, but rather to distinguish some important indicators that might point to the corruption of a practice.

inclined to try out new things that do not guarantee success, which, in turn, results in a lack of variety in styles, methods, voices and topics that are valuable to its practice.[17]

6. Conclusion

While competition for external goods is necessary to sustain the practice of philosophy, this does not mean that we should just accept any form of competition in any situation. Which external goods are distributed competitively, how much of these are distributed competitively, to whom and on which grounds are all open to change. While competition might be desirable in some cases, in other situations we should be more wary.

Should we organise competitive philosophy events, even when reaping the benefits of doing philosophy can more easily (and often only) be obtained in collaborative and non-competitive ways? Should research funding only be distributed on a competitive basis or should part of it be granted unconditionally? Should we give departments financial incentives to take on more doctoral students if academic jobs are already scarce? Is the best way to show your philosophical worth by means of publication numbers?

While these complicated questions require a nuanced answer, there is one important factor that should always be taken into account: does competition in that particular instance come at the cost of what we deem valuable about (and even indispensable to) philosophy? This includes being guided by genuine curiosity; gaining a more sophisticated understanding of ourselves and the world; critically reflecting on what matters; being open to the possibility that one is wrong; and trying to obtain wisdom or come closer to the truth. These things do get lost when the philosophical practice becomes too competitive.

[17] Cf. Kohn (1992, pp. 129-130), who argues that competition encourages rank conformity. He quotes George Leonard, who says that 'A culture dedicated to creating standardized, specialized, predictable human components could find no better way of grinding them out than by making every possible aspect of life a matter of competition. "Winning out" in this respect … shapes conformist robots.' Kohn adds that unique qualities cannot be ranked per definition, so taking part in a competitive process of ranking therefore demands conformity.

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