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COMPARATIVE PRIDE

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Abstract: Comparative pride – that is, pride in how one compares to others in some respect – is often thought to be warranted. In this paper, I argue that this common position is mistaken. The paper begins with an analysis of how things seem when a person feels pride. Pride, I claim, presents some aspect of the self with which one identifies as being worthy. Moreover, in some cases, it presents this aspect of the self as something one is responsible for. I then go on to argue that when the focus of one's pride is comparative, things are never as pride makes them seem. The core problem is that if the performance in which one takes pride is really valuable, the fact that it is superior to the performance of others does nothing to contribute to that value. I conclude with a discussion of why so many are inclined to validate comparative pride and a response to those who claim that comparisons are essential to pride because they must be used to set standards of excellence.

Pride is central to our conceptions of ourselves, and hence to how we live our lives. Looking back over our lives, points of pride (or their absence) loom large in our assessments of how we have done, and are among the building blocks of our self-esteem. Our self-esteem, in turn, informs our choices in all sorts of ways, making us confident or cautious as we confront new challenges. And looking forward, as we survey our options, which choice will set (or keep) us on a path that we can be proud of will often figure prominently in how appealing we find it.

This pervasive influence on our choices means that it matters whether our feelings of pride are rational or not. For if our pride is not fitting, if it does it does not accurately reflect our value and the value of what we do, its influence on our choices is likely to be pernicious. It will distort our practical deliberations rather than inform them.

My thesis in this paper is that pride is a rational, fitting and reliable guide to our worth only when it is based on attributes of ourselves that don't essentially involve comparisons to others. While legitimate pride will be grounded in our achievements, it won't be grounded in our competitive success. Doing well should often be the basis of pride. Doing better than others should not.

This is not the prevailing view within philosophy, nor, I think, within our contemporary culture. As it is much easier for a philosopher to document the prevalence of a view in philosophy, that is where I will focus my attention. But I suspect a moment's reflection will suffice to bring to mind plenty of examples of comparative pride in ordinary life. What's more, along with being common, comparative pride is not treated as suspect or as worth getting over, as say, fear of garter snakes might be. Instead, it is encouraged: the winners among us are often told how proud they should be of their being victories.

As far as philosophers are concerned, many of those who have taken a position on the question think that rational pride *always* has a comparative basis. Some of these

philosophers hold that this is so because the emotion of pride includes a judgment with explicitly comparative content. Richard Taylor, for instance, believes that “Pride is the justified love for oneself. . . Genuinely proud people perceive themselves as better than others, and their pride is justified because their perception is correct.” (Taylor: 100) Similarly, Aaron Ben-Ze’ev claims that “Both shame and pride acknowledge a profound difference when one compares oneself with others,” and adds that so understood, it often has “a positive value.” (Ben-Ze’ev: 244) And to take one more example, Arindam Chakrabarti, drawing inspiration from Hume, sees a person’s pride as essentially involving a belief that there is some good feature that “she alone has ... or [that]she is one of only a few that have [it]...” (Chakrabarti: 37)

The upshot of Robert Nozick’s view is similar, although the route is less direct. On his view, emotions of self-assessment need not wear their comparative content on their sleeve. Feelings of self-esteem, for instance, are based on a belief that one possesses significant quantities of some socially valued attribute or talent. So far, there is no explicit reference to others. But Nozick goes on to suggest that what counts as a “significant” quantity of some valued attribute, must at root be defined comparatively. “There is no standard of doing something well, independent of how it is or can be done by others.” (Nozick: 244) As a result, even if a person can have a feeling of self-esteem that doesn’t involve an occurrent representation of how they compare to others, their standards of success are necessarily derived from their views of how their valuable attributes compare to others’.

In what follows, I will show why I think all of these views are mistaken. But before I begin, I’d like to present what I hope will be a shared intuition that will presage where the argument is headed, and which might help make my admittedly heterodox position seem more attractive.

The thought is to be found, not without some irony, in Nozick’s discussion of self-esteem. In a footnote at the end of his argument for the rationality of comparative self-evaluation, he asks us to consider the following statement by Timothy Leary:

‘It’s my ambition to be the holiest, wisest, most beneficial man alive today. Now this may sound megalomaniac, but I don't see why. I don’t see why... every person who lives in the world, shouldn’t have this ambition. What else should you try to be? The president of the board, or the chairman of the department, or the owner of this and that?’ (Leary: 218)

Here is what Nozick has to say about it:

There is certainly no objection to wanting to be as holy, wise and beneficial as possible, yet an ambition to be the holiest, wisest, most beneficial person alive today is bizarre. Similarly, one can want to be as enlightened as possible ... but it would be bizarre to want especially to be the most enlightened person alive, or to be more enlightened than someone else. How one values one’s degree of enlightenment depends only upon it, whatever others are like. This suggests that the absolutely most important things do not lend themselves to such comparative evaluation; if so, the comparative theory offered in the text would not hold universally. (Nozick: 244)

The basic idea of this paper is that what is true of ‘the absolutely most important things’ in life is true of all appropriate bases of pride: none of them lend themselves to comparative evaluation. Nozick is right that enlightened people don’t pride themselves on being more enlightened than others. On my view, this is not because of something special about the goal of enlightenment. Rather it is because, being enlightened, they see that such comparative pride is always a mistake.

What kind of mistake is Leary making? There are several candidates. One possibility is moral: in being or (aspiring to be) proud because of one’s superiority to others, one embraces an attitude that is objectionable on moral grounds – perhaps this way of thinking about oneself is incompatible with thinking of one’s fellow humans as equals.¹ Another diagnosis of Leary’s mistake is prudential. In making preeminence so central to his self-assessment, Leary sets himself up for either disappointment or self-deception, neither of which are conducive to a good life when experienced in large doses.²

The kind of mistake that will be my focus here, however, is neither moral nor prudential. Instead, it is theoretical. When I say that comparative pride is irrational, what I mean is that it is never a fitting response to one’s own attributes; that it is always unwarranted; that it is the emotional equivalent of a false belief. Comparative pride presents things as being some way that they are not.³

Establishing such a conclusion will take two steps. First, we will need a clear picture of how pride presents things to those who feel it. When one is proud of oneself for something, how is one taking the world to be? Then, given an answer to this analytical question, the second step will be to ask when, if ever, things are actually this way when what one is proud of involves a comparison with others. If the answer is, as I believe, that the world is never the way that comparative pride presents it as being, then comparative pride is always irrational.

As the word ‘pride’ and its inflections are ambiguous, it is worth pausing to more precisely specify my target. The pride I will be concerned with is an episodic emotion. This distinguishes it from the sense of ‘pride’ that is typically being used when we refer to someone as a ‘proud person.’ People who are proud in this sense have a character trait that partly consists of a disposition to feel the episodic emotion of pride, but there is more. Proud people also feel entitled to the recognition they believe they deserve on the basis of the things they are proud of, and are consequently distressed when it is not forthcoming. So while the analysis of the emotion of pride in what follows will be relevant to understanding the character trait proud people have, there is more in this trait that I will not speak to.⁴

¹ Robert C. Roberts (1991) discusses some reasons for thinking comparative pride is morally objectionable.

² The prudential costs of comparative pride appear to beset even those with more modest goals. See Kasser (2002).

³ This way of understanding the rationality of emotions is central to recent sentimentalist accounts of value. For an important early discussion, see Justin D’Arms and Daniel Jacobson (2000).

⁴ One author who does tackle an analysis of this trait is Kristjan Kristjánsson (2001).

Closer to my focus is what we typically refer to as ‘self-esteem.’ Like the pride I will be discussing, ‘self-esteem’ often refers to a positive conative attitude that has the self as part of its focus.⁵ But unlike pride, it needn’t have an intentional object. When one feels pride in the sense being discussed here, one is always proud of something specific about oneself. Self-esteem, on the other hand, is a free-floating sense of one’s overall value: one doesn’t have self-esteem of something in particular. That said, in the normal case, a person’s self-esteem is causally related to the amount of pride they take in their attributes or accomplishments. The more often and more intensely a person feels proud of something, the higher their self-esteem is apt to be. And although I will not argue the point here, I think that this connection implies that if comparative pride is irrational, then self-esteem that is built on a foundation of comparative judgments will be irrational as well.

So the pride I will be discussing is a positive emotional experience focused on the self that has an intentional object. Of course, this is true of other emotional experiences as well, such as being pleased that something about oneself is the case. One thing that distinguishes pride is that it involves a judgment that the attribute is valuable, noble or worthy. This is partly indicated by the fact that pride is an emotion with a positive valence. But being pleased about something also has a positive valence, but needn’t be an instance of pride. One might be pleased that one is wearing pink shoes, for instance, but fail to be proud of that fact. Similarly, we can imagine a compulsive person who is happy that they have locked the front door for the twelfth time, but not proud that she has. In both cases, what would prevent the person’s positive attitude towards some property she possesses from being pride is that she does not take wearing pink shoes or having repeatedly locked the same door as being something valuable, noble or worthy.

Other positive emotions share this evaluative judgment as well, such as admiration and awe. Unlike these, however, pride’s object must be something that bears some close relation to the person who experiences it. What is the nature of this close relation? The answer, I think, depends on what kind of pride one feels. The objects of one kind of pride are simply attributes of the self with which one identifies. This kind of pride is a cornerstone of identity politics: people often proclaim that they are proud to be gay or black or a woman or an American. Less politically, people sometimes feel pride when their alma mater wins a national championship, or when their grandparent’s heroism in war is celebrated. Let us call this kind of pride ‘identity-pride.’⁶

As these examples suggest, the attributes that one is identity-proud of can be entirely outside one’s control. Whether the relationship between a person and the ground of her pride is ‘close’ is a matter of the role it plays in her conception of herself: if something is important to what kind of person she takes herself to be, if it is an attribute in terms of which she, and perhaps others think of her, then it is eligible to serve as the basis for pride.⁷ The fact that a person who feels pride identifies with what she is proud of explains

⁵ ‘Self-esteem’ can also refer to a disposition to having feelings of self-esteem, as when we say that a person ‘has high (or low) self-esteem.’

⁶ Neu (1998) discusses this form of pride.

⁷ Gabriele Taylor (1985: 30-32) characterizes the connection between a person who feels pride and its object as having something to do with belonging – i.e. a person who is proud of something takes that thing to belong to them or themselves to belong in some way to it.

why it includes a boost to her sense of her own standing: if she conceives of herself partly as descendant-of-Simon-Bolivar, then she is apt to feel the light of his noble exploits shine on her as well as him; if she does not take this lineage as important to who she is, then she is apt to be impressed by his deeds, but not think that they bear in any significant way on what kind of a person she is. In the first case but not the second, she will be proud of the fact that she is his descendant.

Identity-pride contrasts with another kind of pride, which we often express with the locution “proud *of myself* for.” Things that one is proud of oneself for have to be things that one is responsible for or that one deserves credit for. We can well imagine a person who is proud of being wealthy, no matter how that wealth was acquired; but it would be a mistake for a person to be proud *of herself* for being wealthy if her wealth was due to a windfall inheritance bequeathed by a relative whom she never knew. Or even more clearly, if less realistically, imagine a person who, as a prank, calls in a fraudulent bomb threat to a day care center. Just after the teachers evacuate everyone inside, the building’s boiler happens to explode, destroying one of the classrooms. It would be perverse for this person to be proud of themselves for having saved the toddlers’ lives. The explanation for this is that being proud of oneself involves assessing oneself as an agent. When we are proud of ourselves, it is what we have done, or what we are in virtue of what we have done, that is the focus. It is the self as an agent that is taken to be admirable or noble or worthy in some respect. When it is important to distinguish this kind of pride from identity-pride, I will use the term ‘achievement-pride.’

Of course, even the person who inherits wealth is likely to bear some causal responsibility for her holdings – had she made different choices, she might not have been in a position to inherit; she might, for instance, have been dead. So the issue is really that things we are proud of ourselves for have to be things that we are *sufficiently* responsible for. And given how finely degrees of responsibility can vary, and given that we are not here discussing a natural kind, there is apt to be a good deal of vagueness regarding how much responsibility for an attribute will be sufficient to make it something we can be proud of ourselves for being or doing. Still, we have plenty of clear cases that can serve as guides. Those whose wealth is inherited are not sufficiently responsible for it to be proud of themselves in this regard; while the disadvantaged teenager who through hard work, perseverance and grit overcomes the odds and is accepted at a good university is sufficiently responsible to be proud of himself for his accomplishment.

With this understanding of pride in hand, let us turn our attention to comparative pride in particular. What distinguishes comparative pride is its object – the thing that the proud person is proud of. We said earlier that the experience of pride involves taking this thing to be valuable or worthy. In instances of comparative pride, the object involves a comparison between the self and others, and consequently the value or worthiness of the object is understood at least partly in terms of how it compares to the attributes possessed by other people. All evaluation is made relative to some standard; the evaluations in comparative pride are relative to a standard that essentially involves the value possessed by others. To illustrate: a person who is proud of their lush and weed-free lawn experiences noncomparative pride, while a person who is proud that their lawn is the lushest and freest of weeds in the neighborhood experiences comparative pride; a person who is proud to have sailed around the world experiences noncomparative pride, while a

person who is proud to be the youngest person to have sailed around the world experiences comparative pride; and so on.

While comparative pride is quite common, we should not overstate the case. For there are occasions on which a person's pride is *caused* by a comparative judgment, yet the resulting pride is noncomparative. This can happen when the comparative judgment leads the person to change their view of the value of an accomplishment. In such a case, the comparison performs an epistemic function, but is not itself the object of one's pride. Imagine a young violinist who is encouraged to send in an audition tape to a summer camp for promising musicians. The acceptance letter she receives back mentions that the jury found her phrasing to be the most nuanced of the hundreds of applicants they reviewed. This comparative information might lead to a feeling of pride, but this pride need not be comparative pride. It will only be comparative if what she is proud of is that her phrasing was thought to be better than the other applicants'. But that need not be so. Rather, she could simply be proud of her phrasing. If so, the comparative information would likely have informed her opinion of the quality of her phrasing; whereas she had previously taken it for granted, the note may have led her to pay attention to it in a way that increased her appreciation.

So when you feel pride you have a positive emotional experience that consists partly in identifying yourself in terms of some valuable attribute you possess. And if it is achievement-pride you feel, you will also take yourself to be responsible for possessing that valuable thing. The issue for us, then, is whether things can ever be as our pride presents them when its object is comparative. Is being better than others something we can be sufficiently responsible for? Is being better than others in some respect or other valuable? If not, then comparative pride we feel will be misleading – it will constitute a false representation – and consequently will be unwarranted, unfitting, irrational.

It will be useful to have a particularly plausible case of comparative achievement-pride to ground the discussion. Here is one: in 2015, Claire Tuggle set the US national record for girls in the ten-and-under age group in the 200-yard freestyle with a time of 1:58.20. Should she be proud not only of how fast and well she swam, but of the further fact that she swam the 200-free faster than any other American girl aged ten or less ever has? Or, as seems the case with Timothy Leary's anticipatory pride in becoming the holiest, wisest, most beneficial man alive, would such comparative pride be a mistake?

Let us begin with the question of responsibility: was Claire sufficiently responsible for her achievement for her to be proud *of herself* for having achieved it? There is one obvious reason for scepticism – if hard determinists are right, then Claire *couldn't* be responsible for her achievement. That is, if our actions are causally determined and causal determination erases any responsibility people might have for what they do, then nobody, including Claire, can warrantably be proud of themselves for anything.

This is an important point, for hard determinism might well be true. But since an argument from hard determinism undermines all achievement-pride, it does not illuminate what is especially problematic about comparative pride. So, for the sake of the argument, let us set hard determinism aside, assume that people can sometimes be

sufficiently responsible for what they do to be rationally proud of themselves for doing it, and address the question of whether Claire's record-setting falls into that category.

By most ordinary measures, Claire was responsible for her swimming the 200-freestyle in under two minutes. She trains four days a week for two hours each day, eats well, and works diligently on her technique. On the assumption that such swimming was worthy, then ordinary measures would sanction her being proud of herself for her time. But this would not be comparative pride, and hence not to the present point. What we are interested in is whether, in addition to the pride she takes in her swimming, she should be proud of herself for the further fact that this time set a record.

What distinguishes this comparative achievement from the non-comparative achievement is what others have (or in this case, have not) done. Namely, what makes it the case that Claire not only swam fast, but record-setting fast was that no other 10-year-old girl had achieved a similar time. And unless things are much stranger than they appear, Claire was not responsible for that further fact. The explanation of other children's failure to swim two hundred yards in under two minutes does not include any input from her. Their times are likely attributable to many different things – their own choices, their parents' choices, their attitudes, their genetics, their opportunities, and so on – but Claire's choices or actions are unlikely to be among them.

So, assuming things are not strange, Claire was not responsible for the specific things that made her performance not only fast, but record-setting. In this case, if Claire were to be proud of herself for setting a record in addition to the pride she takes in swimming fast, that extra, comparative pride would be based on something that she is not responsible for. Her comparative achievement-pride would thus be misleading; it would falsely present her record-setting (as distinguished from her simply swimming fast) as something she is responsible for.

This point generalizes quite broadly. What distinguishes comparative success from non-comparative success is what *others* have or have not done. And in normal cases, what others do is not something we can take credit for. Consequently, when we are not only noncomparatively proud of the value our achievements exhibit, but take an additional pride in our achievements outshining those of others, we are taking pride in states of affairs that we are not responsible for bringing about. Such achievement-pride is therefore unwarranted.

This might be at least part of the explanation for why Leary's anticipatory pride in being the wisest person alive seems so odd. When we imagine him being proud of himself for his wisdom, our focus is on him; when we imagine him being additionally proud that his wisdom is unmatched, our focus shifts to the lesser wisdom possessed by others. And this is not something that we imagine him having a hand in bringing about or being able to take credit for. It thus seems odd that he would be proud of himself for their being not being so wise.

There will, however, be cases in which people can plausibly claim responsibility for others' failure to perform to some level. It is possible, for instance, that shortly before a race, a swimmer puts soap on all his competitors' starting blocks, and that consequently their

starts are significantly less strong than they would otherwise have been. And it is possible that, further, this slowness off the block was enough to make the difference between their winning the race and his doing so. Absent his intervention, they, rather than he, would have swum the fastest. In such a case, we might allow that he was responsible for what makes it the case that he not only swam fast, but faster than his competitors. If so, we cannot fault any comparative achievement-pride he feels as a result of his victory for misrepresenting things on these grounds.

Which is not to say that we should be comfortable endorsing such pride. There is surely something amiss with a person's taking pride in having won if he achieved this by interfering with the performance of his competitors. But the offense in such exceptional cases must lie somewhere other than the absence of responsibility.

The plausible alternative, of course, is the absence of nobility. Besting people when one has connived to make them perform less well than they are capable of hardly seems worthy of admiration. And since it is only fitting to take pride in things that are worthy, a cheater's pride in winning is unwarranted.

What I will argue now is that what is true of the cheater's pride is true of all comparative pride, albeit for somewhat different reasons. All such pride is unwarranted because there is nothing noble in one person's being superior to others. As before, it will be helpful to consider our particular test case – Claire's record-setting swim. And as before, it is important to remember that the specific feat we are interested in is the comparative one – it is her besting all those other ten year-olds. We are not here interested in her having swum well. We can be sure that she did. Similarly, we are not asking whether there is any nobility in the degree to which she applied herself in training for competition. Again, surely there is. What we want to know is whether the fact that she swam faster than any other American girl who had not yet turned eleven *adds* anything to the nobility of her achievement. Put another way, if her time had not set a record, would that have meant that her excellent swimming was any less deserving of admiration, and that consequently she should have been less proud of her performance.

Imagine that Claire achieved her time on the same date that she did, and in exactly the same fashion, but because she was born prematurely, this date fell a few days after her eleventh birthday. In this case, it would not be true that she had swum faster than any American ten year-old while she herself was ten. Indeed, rather than setting a record, she would have failed to rank in the top 100 of that year's performances in her age group. Is it plausible to say that her spending the last few days of gestation outside the womb robbed the world of what would otherwise have been a particularly extraordinary swimming performance? Would the value of her accomplishment have been any different?

In my view, the answer to these questions is obvious: the precise date Claire's mother gave birth to her is irrelevant to the value of her swimming, and hence to the value of her performance when she swam those two hundred yards in under two minutes. The precise date she left the womb is, however, determinative of whether her swimming set a record. And so her record-setting is not the kind of thing that can add value to what she accomplished.

Even those who agree that premature birth would not have diminished the value of Claire's performance may not yet be convinced that her superiority to others adds no independent value to her accomplishments. For this particular hypothetical concerns record-setting, and that may be thought a special kind of case. Records require precise criteria to define the task they measure, even where no principled precise criteria are available. Our premature-birth hypothetical trades on one such criterion – birthdate thresholds in age-group records. It may be thought that the reason premature birth would have done nothing to change the value of Claire's accomplishment is that it merely changes which side of an unprincipled threshold Claire's achievement would have fallen on. And since the threshold is, though necessary, arbitrary, this explains why this particular way of failing to set a record would not have changed the value of her swim.

So let us set record-setting and its troublesome arbitrariness aside. The defender of comparative pride will want to say that, record or not, there are at least some more-or-less ten-year-olds whose failure to swim as fast as Claire made Claire's swimming performance better than it otherwise would have been. The question, then, is who those actual or potential competitors might be.

In some cases, what explains why Claire swam faster than other children is that the other children were physically incapable of swimming as fast as she. No matter what these ten-year-olds did, no matter how hard they tried, no matter what choices they made, their physical characteristics prevented them from swimming that fast. Perhaps, like Michael Phelps, Claire has especially long arms, feet, hands, and torso and especially short legs. Perhaps, like nearly all elite sprinters, Claire possesses the gene ACTN3, which is a gene related to the functioning of fast-twitch muscles and that is found in nearly all elite sprinters, but that many people lack.⁸ Whatever the details are, Claire has physical advantages that are absent in those ten year-olds that could not possibly have matched her time, and this advantage explains her being faster than they. This advantage, though, disqualifies her besting them from being worthy for the same reason that there is nothing worthy in my being able to run faster than a toddler. There is nothing noble in beating people who had no chance of performing to your level.

Of course, there likely were some ten year-olds who were capable of swimming as fast as Claire did, but failed to do so. Some of these failed to perform to her level because they lacked the resources to realize their potential. Perhaps they did not receive good enough coaching, or their families weren't wealthy enough to pay for pool time, or they grew up before the development of flip turns and gutterless pools. Once again, these explanations of her superiority to them undermine any extra claim to worthiness her beating them might generate – her performing better than children who did not have the opportunity to perform to their physical potential is nothing that should evoke additional admiration. The social and technological advantages she had and they lacked mean that beating them is not something that shines any greater light on her performance.

Some others she swam faster than simply didn't try hard enough, and many never tried at all. Out-performing those who haven't really tried, who haven't put in the effort to realize their potential, is also nothing that elevates her achievement. As a child, I invented a

⁸ See (Yang et al., 2003: 627–631).

game with elaborate rules that involved throwing a ball against the side of our garage, and then played it for a few afternoons – reflecting all the while that I was the best person in the world at this game, that no one in history ever played it as well as I did. Even then I realized that though my world-dominance was a fact, mine was a hollow victory. Or, consider a less extreme example: a child who otherwise would have beaten Claire comes in second because they chose to work at the SPCA on Saturdays, whereas Claire went to practice. In either case, a victory that is secured because one’s competitors chose to focus elsewhere does not elevate the value of what one does. Performing better than those who have failed to put in sufficient effort does not add to the goodness one’s own efforts yield.

And, finally, consider those ten year-olds who were capable of matching or besting Claire’s time, had the opportunity, and put in the necessary effort. What could explain why they failed? It must be some form of what Nagel calls resultant luck – luck in “the way things turn out.” Perhaps the otherwise Claire-beating ten-year-old fell off her skateboard the day before the meet and sprained her knee. Or perhaps the timers assigned to her lane were all late in stopping their watches. There are all sorts of scenarios, but when one possesses the competence and exerts the necessary effort to succeed, yet fails, the explanation has to be that some event outside of one’s control conspires to prevent success. But if anything, these sorts of slip-ups reduce the amount of the amount of value the world contains; they do not add to it in virtue of allowing Claire to have swum faster than these victims of chance.

We have now exhausted the competitors over whom victory generates additional nobility for Claire. Those she swam faster than either lacked the necessary physical capabilities, lacked the opportunity to develop them sufficiently, simply did not put in the effort, or had bad luck. Swimming faster than others because they fall into one of these categories does not make your accomplishments shine any brighter. She should indeed be proud of swimming and training so well. But since there is nothing noble or worthy in the additional fact that she beat the best time of any other ten-year-old, her pride should not be augmented by the fact that she holds this record, just as it should not be diminished when the next gifted swimmer bests it.

Though Claire’s case is but one of many initially plausible instances of comparative pride, the argument just given covers all comparative superiority. In every case, including those that don’t involve formal competitions, winning is a matter of one’s rivals lacking the competence, opportunity, effort or luck to succeed. But out-performing others for these reasons fails to add anything of value to the world above and beyond the non-comparative attributes of that performance. So comparative pride presents things as being some way they are not. It represents its basis – one’s superiority to others – as valuable independent of the value of one’s performance considered on its own. And insofar as it necessarily portrays the world as some way it is not, it is always unwarranted

Earlier I claimed that Nozick was right to see Leary’s aspiration as a mistake, and that the explanation of the mistake would undermine comparative pride generally. We are now in a better position to see why. Comparative success depends on features that are irrelevant to the value that the comparison is carried out in terms of. Being more beneficent than others, for instance, means that these others were incapable, unlucky, or didn’t try – and all of these considerations are orthogonal to the goodness of beneficence. However

beneficent Leary was, the goodness of that beneficence lies in the value of others well-being and his causal contribution to the realization of that value. What needs to be added to this in order to make it the case that others failed to achieve his level – their incapacity, bad luck, or lack of effort – has nothing to do with what makes beneficence noble. Indeed, people’s inability to be beneficent, their bad luck in converting their competence into good results, and their lack of effort in helping others are all things that, from the perspective of beneficence, are of negative value. And so in aspiring to be not only beneficent, but to be more beneficent than others, Leary hopes for, and takes anticipatory pleasure in the prospect of, things that are contrary to value of beneficence. He hopes others fail to be at least as beneficent as he. In so doing, he appears to value something that is the contrary of the value which would ground his pride.

Contrary to Nozick’s supposition, the particular bases of Leary’s prospective pride play no role in this reasoning. What distinguishes the absolute value of what one has done from the fact that one’s achievement is relatively superior is that others have failed in their attempts to realize the value to the degree that you have. But this distinguishing fact – others’ failure – cannot itself be of value. Indeed, it is of disvalue. And this shows that there is a kind of incoherence in taking pride in being the best. Such pride involves both a positive valuation of success in that domain – for otherwise it would not be the source of one’s pride – and a positive valuation of failure in that domain – for one’s superiority is conceptually dependent on others’ inferiority. The reason that Nozick recognized the inappropriateness of comparative pride with respect to beneficence, holiness and wisdom, I suspect, is that here the wrongheadedness of valuing others’ failure is particularly obvious. Since these are such lofty goods, the mistake of valuing other people’s failing to exhibit them is glaring. But though less striking, the mistake in adopting the same attitude in less lofty endeavors is no less real.

Against this point, Leary might claim that he doesn’t really value beneficence, he values *his* being beneficent. That is, what he takes to be noble is his own helping of others, not the helping of others in general. And this, he might continue, removes the incoherence. One can value one’s own characteristics without committing oneself to any position on the characteristics of others one way or the other.

The trouble is that Leary isn’t just concerned with his own achievement. He is also concerned that it compare favorably with anyone else’s. And the reason to care that one’s own achievement surpasses that of others is because one takes others’ achievements to be capable of goodness, worthiness, or nobility. To care that your own achievement be superior only to the worthless performances of others makes no sense. It is only superiority to the worthy achievements of others that could possibly generate pride. So the claim that Leary really thinks only his own achievement matters, which is dubious in any case, doesn’t protect him from the charge that he is simultaneously committed to valuing the achievements of others and valuing their falling short.

So what has gone wrong? If I am right that comparative pride necessarily involves a mistaken valuation, and is thus always unwarranted, why is it so common? A first place to turn for an error theory would be evolutionary psychology. Since so much of what matters evolutionarily speaking is at root competitive, it would hardly be surprising that a concern for relative superiority was selected for. If, as seems likely, a desire for winning

promoted the fitness of hunter-gatherers in the Pleistocene, our brains may well have been designed to motivate us to compete and give us a shot of chemical reward when we win. It goes without saying, however, that the fact that we have been wired to desire victory hardly implies that victory is itself valuable; what is noble and what serves the propagation of our genes need not go hand in hand.

But it is not just our Pleistocene ancestors' genes that might have found a drive to win useful. Even those who are aimed at generating things of true worth might be well served by competitive urges. For one way to achieve greatness is to strive to achieve superiority over others. Provided that these others are performing to a high level in some worthwhile domain, out-performing them is only possible by doing something that is worthy. To be sure, this explanation is likely to piggyback on a prior desire to win; otherwise it would make more sense to aim at greatness directly. But if that competitive desire is in place anyway, it might be well put to the service of spurring worthy performances. Once again, though, this does nothing to vindicate comparative pride: even if wanting to win instrumentally promotes worthy achievements, that does nothing to show that winning is worthy in itself.

And finally, even if one is not particularly moved by competitive desire, paying attention to how one compares to others may still be wise. For their performances can provide valuable information about how one's own efforts are proceeding, what kind of investments might make what kind of payoffs, where potential hurdles or pitfalls lie, and so on. Others who are also striving in their own ways are a kind of natural experiment from which one can indeed learn important lessons.

For all these reasons, then, our focus on how we compare to others is understandable, sometimes even laudable. But when we go that extra step from paying attention to how they are faring, or from desiring that we surpass them, to being proud of our superiority, we step in to error. Our pride expresses our values, not simply our concerns or desires. Wanting and valuing are closely connected, and persistent desires can morph into valuation, but they are fundamentally different attitudes. Valuation involves a positive assessment of the object as such and in general; it implies that the object is worthy of esteem – not just one's own but that others' as well. Desire implies none of these things. And this can explain our common error. It can make sense to want to be better than others, but not to be proud that one is. But many of us lack the psychological vigilance necessary to prevent a slip from being pleased that we have obtained something we want to being proud that we have done so.

We thus have an adequate explanation, I think, for why so many of us are apt to make what I have argued is a mistake. There is, however, one problem that remains to be addressed. Several authors have suggested that pride must be comparative because what counts as an achievement worthy of pride is measured by a scale that is set by the achievements of others. At the beginning of this discussion, we saw that Nozick took this view. More recently, D'Arms and Jacobson have echoed it:

Part of the desire to achieve is surely an aspiration to excellence, and excellence in various endeavors—from scholarship to the arts, industry, even athletics—contributes to human flourishing. Yet which accomplishments count as excellent,

or sufficiently good to be worthy of pride, is largely a function of the performance of others (especially those who are nearby). This is especially obvious with respect to athletic excellence. What counts as an excellent sprinter depends on how fast people are sprinting during the period in which one competes. But reflection shows that such comparisons play an important role not merely in identifying but in determining excellence in many domains. Hence, whether one has excelled, in some of the ways that contribute to one's flourishing, is partly determined by the degree to which one's achievements stand out—albeit among various comparison classes. (D'Arms and Jacobson, 2006: 123)

If they are right that excellence is both essential to warranted pride and is essentially comparative, then the conclusion of the argument in this paper would be very strong indeed. It would be that pride is never warranted, period. For pride would necessarily involve valuing one's superiority, and, I have argued, one's superiority is not valuable.

This implication can be avoided if we deny that the rationality of pride must be determined by comparing how one's performance compares to others'. This is not the place for a full defense of a positive account of reasonable pride, but a sketch may serve to allay concerns that we are faced with the dilemma of accepting either that there is something valuable in others' failure to achieve something worthy or that pride is always irrational.

Return to how (achievement-)pride presents things: it presents some aspect of ourselves that we identify with as both something that we are responsible for and something that is valuable. How much pride you are warranted in taking in something, then, should be a function of its value and the degree to which you are responsible for it. The more valuable your achievement the more pride it would be warranted to feel; and the more responsible you are for your valuable achievement, the more pride it would be warranted to feel. Neither of these need be determined in relation to what others do. How responsible you are will be a function of your role in the causal chain that produced the achievement, and this can be determined without comparing your causal contribution to that of others. The more your achievement is the product of effort, attention and commitment, for instance, the more responsible for it you are; the more it is attributable to luck or inheritance, the less responsible you are. Similarly, how valuable your achievement is can be determined using a non-comparative standard. To take some of the examples we have used so far, the faster you sprint or swim, the better your sprinting or swimming; the more you help people, the more benevolent you are; the more you understand, the wiser you are; and so on.

On such a view, there is no threshold that it is necessary to cross before an achievement is 'good enough' to warrant taking any pride in it at all. If there is any value to some aspect of yourself with which you identify, and you are sufficiently responsible for producing it, some degree of pride will be a fitting response. And since there is no such threshold, there is no need to refer to the performance of others to set it.

Some may object that this makes warranted pride too easy to achieve. Even if the degree of pride warranted is very small, they will say, there are some 'achievements' that are too modest to warrant any pride whatsoever. I probably exhibited some very small amount of

nobility in my drive home from work today. But surely it would be a mistake for me to be proud of myself for such a trivial thing. So some threshold for pride there must be.

I have to admit that there would be something amiss about my feeling such pride. But that is not to say that the mistake must lie in its being unwarranted. Recall that the notion of ‘warranted’ and ‘rational’ we have been interested in here is theoretical rather than practical: it is a matter of whether the way world is corresponds to the way it appears to be when an emotion is felt. On the present account, the emotion of achievement-pride presents some feature of oneself as being both valuable and something one is responsible for. And on the assumption that my drive exhibited some degree of value and that it is something that I did, then my pride would get things right.

Which is not to say that I should feel it. In many ways, the situation here is the same as with belief. That a proposition is true does not imply that it makes sense to occurrently believe it. A person whose mind is full of trivial truths is hardly an ideal epistemic agent even though they cannot be accused of any factual error. Likewise, a person who feels pride in response to every little shred of value they produce or exhibit can be far from an ideal conative agent even though each episode of pride is, strictly speaking, warranted. For prudential and moral reasons, it is good to be more discriminating in what one actually takes pride in. Given our limited attentional budget, filling our consciousness with pride in trivial accomplishments will mean that we fail to attend to things that we have prudential and moral reasons to give priority. So while there will indeed be something to be said against most cases of pride in minute ‘accomplishments,’ what should be said is that they are unwise rather than that they are unwarranted.

There is, to be sure, more work to be done to in order to fill out this sketch of appropriate non-comparative pride. The point for present purposes, though, is that we can be confident that recognizing that comparative pride is always unwarranted need not compel us to conclude that all pride is unwarranted. Pride in our accomplishments should continue to play a role in our understanding of ourselves and our planning for the future. But pride in our superiority to others is an error that we should correct, lest it lead us to act on a mistaken view of what is noble and worthy in ourselves and what we do.⁹

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