**When Wanting the Best Is Bad**

*Rachel Fredericks*

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**Abstract:** Here I call attention to a class of desires that I call exclusionary desires. To have an exclusionary desire is to desire something under a description such that, were the desire satisfied, it would be logically impossible for people other than the desiring subject to possess the desired object. Assuming that we are morally responsible for our desires insofar as and because they reflect our evaluative judgments and are in principle subject to rational revision, I argue that we should, morally speaking, alter both social structures and our individual psychologies to minimize, or at least substantially reduce, exclusionary desires.

**Keywords:** exclusionary desires, competition, zero-sum game, generosity, moral responsibility, blame

**1. Introduction**

Most people are bursting with desires. We want things for ourselves, our loved ones, groups that we are and are not members of, and the world as a whole. We want things briefly and enduringly, weakly and intensely, knowingly and unknowingly. We want things when we have correctly assessed their value and when we have not. Aristotle says (according to some interpretations) that in all these cases, we desire things in the guise of the good (that is, only when we see them as good).[[1]](#footnote-1) Though some criticize that strong claim,[[2]](#footnote-2) this paper does not rely on the strong claim that all desires are for things under the guise of the good, but on the weaker claims that (a) all desires are for things under some guise(s) and not others, and that (b) we *often* desire things under the guise of the good.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Moreover, (c) we sometimes desire things in the guise of the *best*. It is fairly common, at least in contexts familiar to me, to want something because it is the best, most, or only one of its kind. When we desire something under such a description, the desire’s satisfaction precludes anyone else from also having what we desire.[[4]](#footnote-4) So I call these exclusionary desires and argue that, from a moral perspective, we should minimize exclusionary desires to the extent that we are able to, when it does not require the sacrifice of other equally or more important values.

This does not entail that wanting what is best is always bad. The desires that I do my best or that others do their best are untouched by my criticisms, because such desires are not exclusionary. My doing my best is compatible with you doing yours, though we cannot both do *the* best relative to a single standard. Furthermore, neither a desire for some token of the best type of a thing nor a desire for the overall best state of affairs is exclusionary, so neither of those are subject to my criticisms either.

With that clarification in mind, I shall explain how exclusionary desires are like and unlike other desires (Section 2), make two arguments that exclusionary desires should generally be avoided (Section 3), respond to two objections (Section 4), and discuss the appropriateness of blaming people for exclusionary desires (Section 5).

In doing so, I take it for granted that we can be morally responsible for our attitudes as well as our actions, accepting a rationalist, not volitionalist, account of the criteria for moral responsibility.[[5]](#footnote-5) On this view, an agent is morally responsible for an attitude when it reflects that agent’s evaluative judgments and thus the agent’s rational activity. So we bear moral responsibility for some things that we do not and cannot directly or voluntarily control or choose, contra volitionalist accounts of responsibility. Desires are one type of intentional attitudes for which we can be morally responsible, because they can reflect our evaluative judgments and are in principle subject to rational revision. Assuming this account of moral responsibility, I argue that people can be blameworthy for wanting what is best, but that we are rarely justified in actually blaming people for having exclusionary desires.

**2. Exclusionary Desires & Their Revisability**

If I am correct that desires are mental states for which we are responsible, then it is sometimes appropriate to make moral assessments of people (including ourselves) because of their desires. For our desires can reflect our evaluative judgments and are in principle open to rational revision. For example, as a vegetarian, when I learn that a particularly piquant-smelling dish contains meat, I tend to revise my desires relative to it. If I had a desire to eat it, the desire might or might not disappear entirely, but the character of the desire would change in a way that mirrors my evaluative judgments about the inappropriateness of my eating the dish.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This example helps show that when someone desires something, they desire it under one or more, but not all possible descriptions. For example, one might desire a particular plate of food under the description “a beautifully arranged meal,” and “a nutritious meal,” but not “an expensive indulgence.” All three may be accurate descriptions of it, but not all accurate descriptions highlight features that one finds appealing. Similarly, I might desire to make someone laugh, not under the description “laugh at me out of cruelty” or “laugh with me out of pity and embarrassment,” but instead “laugh at the cleverness of my witticism.”

Of course, the descriptions under which we desire things can be opaque to us.[[7]](#footnote-7) Someone with a finely tuned sense of social dynamics might desire to leave a party without realizing that she specifically desires “to flee before these people start yelling at each other.” Similarly, we can explicitly deny that we desire things or that we desire them under certain descriptions; a white person who prides himself on being “color-blind” might want to avoid encountering people of color when alone after dark, while explicitly denying that he has any such a desire.

Furthermore, desiring something under one description can be morally better than desiring it under another. For the descriptions under which we desire things are intimately connected to the *reasons* that we find things desirable, and thus reflect better and worse exercises of moral agency.[[8]](#footnote-8) For example, a parent might desire to stop smoking under the description “stop yellowing my teeth” or “stop endangering my kids with secondhand smoke.” Or one could desire to avoid being violent under the description “avoid actions that could put me in jail” or “avoid hurting others.” The latter are morally better desires insofar as they reflect morally better judgments.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Narrowing our focus, there are some desires, which I call exclusionary desires, which are desires for goods under descriptions such that the desires’ satisfaction is logically inconsistent with people other than the desiring subjects having the desired goods. Examples of exclusionary desires include desiring to: earn the highest GPA in your class, be someone’s only sexual partner, win the gold medal in women’s modern pentathlon at the next Olympics, be the majority shareholder of Company X, and be the first of your friends to have a grandchild. These desires (unlike a desire to earn a 4.0 GPA, have sex with person Y, achieve a personal best, buy stock in Company X, have a grandchild, sleep in, or learn Mandarin) are desires whose satisfaction precludes others from having the desired good; I call them exclusionary desires since their satisfaction excludes others from attaining the good in question.

Many desires have this exclusionary character.[[10]](#footnote-10) So having exclusionary desires probably seems like a normal, inevitable part of being human. One might even say that we are “hard-wired” to have them.[[11]](#footnote-11) That seems true in that there are features of human psychology that make us capable of, and maybe even prone to having them (under certain conditions). It also seems true that existing social structures pressure us to form them.[[12]](#footnote-12)

However, it is not inevitable that any individual will have any particular exclusionary desire or have a certain number of them. Nor are the rate, distribution, and content of exclusionary desires inevitable at the social level. For exclusionary desires, like other desires, are (in part) products of contingent socialization and in principle subject to rational revision. Of course, revising our desires is often difficult and frequently our attempts to do so are not wholly, if at all, successful. Nevertheless, rational revision of our desires is in principle possible, though generally not through a simple act of will. Furthermore, even if humans are “hard-wired” to have exclusionary desires, it does not mean that such desires increase fitness; they could be evolutionary by-products that never increased fitness, or they could have increased fitness in our evolutionary past, but not under present conditions. Either way, our awareness of selection processes means that we can intentionally intervene in them.

Since I rely on the claim that desires are in principle subject to rational revision, I want to clarify and defend it a bit more. First, consider the rational revision of desires at the level of an individual agent. For example, as a child, I desperately wanted furry pets, but after the death of my beloved guinea pig, that desire changed radically. I could not have merely willed away the desire (before or after his death), but once I understood how that death made me feel, my evaluative judgments about keeping pets altered, and my desire for pets was seriously, abruptly diminished (though not fully eliminated). This change was completely obvious to me.

However, sometimes our desires change without our awareness.[[13]](#footnote-13) For example, my residual desire for pets has been (almost) fully eliminated by thinking more about pets’ environmental impact, pets’ experiences, animal domestication, the time and expense required to care for pets, etc. — though I only became aware of this complex process of desire elimination in hindsight. Because the rational revision of desires can take time, which can make it invisible to us, and can take effort that we are often unwilling to expend, it can seem more unusual or difficult than it is. But it is possible, and it happens often.

More importantly, significant revisions to our desires are possible at the social level and over a longer time scale. Our upbringing has an enormous impact on the desires that we do and do not form. Most Americans today have been socialized not to desire to eat dogs or insects, to practice plural marriage or polyamory, or to live in multi-generation households, but all those practices have been widely desired in different places and times, so it is possible to socialize people differently relative to those desires. For instance, currently, social and economic forces are changing many Americans’ desires (and beliefs) about multi-generation households, as shown by the increasing numbers of people living in them.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Social forces can also impact not just *which* objects we desire, but also the descriptions under which we desire them. Many people desire a college degree, and social forces shape whether they desire it as: (i) a ticket to a better job, (ii) a marker of status in its own right, (iii) a stepping stone to graduate school, or (iv) an end to (certain) parental pressures. In fact, the same person often desires a degree under different descriptions simultaneously or over time.

So if we wanted to, we could develop educational programs and incentive structures that encourage people to have fewer exclusionary desires. In contemporary America, making significant advances in this direction would probably involve, among other things, changing how we think about sports, meritocracy, love, money, success, and many other things that are central to our self-conceptions and cultural practices. But why, you might ask, would we want to do that?

**3. Why (Try to) Diminish Our Exclusionary Desires?**

Let us consider two arguments in favor of minimizing exclusionary desires: one focusing on competition, the other on generosity. The former is robustly empirical, drawing on a wide range of empirical studies from multiple disciplines, while the latter is more conceptual. Neither is conclusive, but jointly, they provide significant moral reason to try to diminish exclusionary desires.

 But first, note that my arguments in favor of diminishing exclusionary desires do not entail that we should eliminate sports, games, sports fandom, or exclusive romantic/sexual relationships. Those practices can exist in the absence of exclusionary desires (though they would differ in some respects from current forms of them). For example, athletes can be motivated solely by the desire to have fun, to achieve a personal best, and/or to meet an objective standard that is not indexed to any competitor’s performance. Of course, not everyone who endorses such practices in their current forms will accept the claim that minimizing exclusionary desires within said practices would make for a satisfactory alternative, but that is a position to be taken after considering the reasons to minimize exclusionary desires.

Furthermore, my arguments do not deny that sports, games, sports fandom, or exclusive romantic/sexual relationships have intrinsic value. My arguments are compatible with those (or other competitive) practices being intrinsically valuable (though I do not take a stand on whether or not they are), since whatever intrinsic value there is in those practices (if any), it cannot lie in the fact that sometimes (and only sometimes), exclusionary desires motivate the people participating in those practices. For the intrinsic value of a practice cannot originate in features of it or motivations for it that are not always present in that practice. Thus, my arguments do not undermine claims about the intrinsic value of any practice. Similarly, my arguments do not deny that sports, games, sports fandom, or exclusive romantic/sexual relationships can appropriately be valued as ends (under some conditions).[[15]](#footnote-15) My arguments are simply meant to show that there are good moral reasons to reduce exclusionary desires; they do not support specific further conclusions about other practices in which exclusionary desires feature (which would require additional premises not defended here).

*3.1 Competition Argument*

My thinking about exclusionary desires began with an interest in jealousy and envy, emotions with close ties to such desires. However, my curiosity about exclusionary desires grew as I gained familiarity with empirical research about related phenomena, especially competition. In this section, I focus on the link between exclusionary desires and competition, arguing that the significant negative consequences of the latter give us reason to minimize, or at least substantially reduce, the former.

I follow Alfie Kohn in defining a structurally competitive (as opposed to individualistic or cooperative) activity as one involving:

*mutually exclusive goal attainment* (“MEGA,” for short). This means, very simply, that my success requires your failure. Our fates are negatively linked. If one of us must lose exactly as much as the other wins, as in poker, then we are talking about a “zero-sum game.” But in any MEGA arrangement, two or more individuals are trying to achieve a goal that cannot be achieved by all of them. This is the essence of competition, as several social scientists have observed.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Kohn argues, at length and with copious support from a wide range of empirical studies, against the myths that (a) competition is an inevitable part of human nature, (b) competition motivates us to achieve optimal results in our endeavors, (c) competition is the best (or only) way for us to enjoy ourselves, and (d) competition enhances self-confidence and thereby improves our character.[[17]](#footnote-17) In doing so, Kohn shows that competition creates many negative consequences: lost productivity, impaired relationships, and anxiety, among many others. While I do not think that all of his arguments are equally strong, taken together, I find them highly persuasive reasons to believe that, in general, competition is not to be desired.

More recent literature continues in the same vein. For example, Kulik, O’Fallon, and Salimath argue that competitive business contexts foster corruption,[[18]](#footnote-18) and the studies cited by Anderman and Murdock indicate a link between increasing structural competition and increasing cheating among students.[[19]](#footnote-19) Feltovich and Ejebu show that, in a life-cycle consumption/savings experiment, people tend to under-save and have lower lifetime earnings when given information about their ranking relative to others (which makes competition salient).[[20]](#footnote-20) Watermeyer and Olssen argue that the “competition fetish” operative in the evaluation of faculty research at UK institutions of higher education is detrimental to academic freedom, autonomy, and critical thinking.[[21]](#footnote-21) Lots of other research illuminates harmful consequences that arise when people think they are playing zero-sum games.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Even competition’s defenders usually recognize that there are limits to its value, admitting that competition is inappropriate in some situations and sometimes brings out the worst in people. In fact, defenses of competition often have a highly restricted scope. For example, Ann Cudd defends competition, but only in a highly-qualified way.[[23]](#footnote-23) She says that Kohn’s claims about the bad effects of competition seem correct, but in her view, competition is good insofar as it involves *cooperation*, so she does not defend what Kohn calls *pure* competition.[[24]](#footnote-24)

 Insofar as competition is problematic and standard defenses of it are highly qualified or inadequate, this bodes ill for exclusionary desires. For exclusionary desires generally (a) are products of competitive social arrangements and (b) motivate individuals to compete. So they perpetuate competitive systems, which fail to produce optimal results in terms of productivity, happiness, and moral character. In general, exclusionary desires and competitive social arrangements are causally intertwined; they either stand, mutually reinforcing each other, or fall together. So if we have consequentialist reasons to avoid competition, as I believe the empirical literature shows, we have a reason to avoid exclusionary desires.[[25]](#footnote-25) Since neither exclusionary desires nor competition are inevitable, we should minimize both.

However, minimizing exclusionary desires does not always require us to change *what* we desire; sometimes it just involves changing why we desire something and thus the description under which we desire it. There is a significant difference between a desire to ace a test under the description “confirm that I understand the course material” as opposed to under the description “outperform my peers.” Since only the latter necessarily depends on the existence of (perceived) competition, taking steps to reduce competition and exclusionary desires would not preclude us from retaining the former, non-exclusionary desire.

 That said, to my knowledge, there has not yet been any empirical research specifically focused on exclusionary desires as such. Furthermore, the empirical research on competition that I have cited may be flawed in some way that I cannot see, and there is always more empirical data to collect and analyze. So we should also consider another, non-consequentialist argument to support the conclusion that we have reason to avoid exclusionary desires.

*3.2 Generosity Argument*

Let us consider another argument for the same conclusion: an argument with virtue ethics, rather than empirical literature, at its core. Virtue ethics provides a framework for assessing a person’s character, as opposed to narrowly focusing on specific actions or desires in isolation. Of course, we cannot assume that commonsense views about virtuous people will be entirely consistent or correct, so we may find reasons to revise some of our intuitions about virtuous people. But intuitions about virtuous people, especially those with the virtue of generosity, help us approach the task of morally assessing exclusionary desires from a different angle.

Generous people are not just those who habitually give good things to others; they also habitually desire that others have good things. This is partly because generous people are not always able or best suited to provide good things to others; they recognize this and desire that others gain good things regardless of who provides them. Insofar as generous people desire that others have good things, this is a *prima facie* reason to avoid exclusionary desires, since having an exclusionary desire is, in effect, desiring that someone else be denied something good.

For whatever states of affairs count as satisfying one’s exclusionary desire are necessarily also states of affairs in which all others lack the desired good. Furthermore, any action that fulfills one’s exclusionary desire necessarily also prevents all others from attaining the desired good. So exclusionary desires function to prevent all others from having good things. Thus, relative to third parties, exclusionary desires are functionally equivalent to desires that all those third parties not attain good things. This functional equivalence gives us a moral reason to avoid exclusionary desires. For example, a chess player’s desire to win is functionally equivalent to a desire for her opponent to lose. Common sense may tell us that only the latter is ungenerous, but their functional equivalence should give us pause about that claim. Upon reflection, we can see that desiring that one have goods that others lack is characteristic of the vice of stinginess or selfishness (a deficiency relative to the mean of generosity), because while people need not desire that all good things accrue to all others in all situations to be generous, stingy or selfish people frequently desire (and act) to block others from attaining good things for self-interested reasons. So generous people will generally avoid exclusionary desires.

Since people can possess virtues to a greater or lesser degree, we can compare exclusionary desires to other more or less generous desires. For example, a very generous person in a monogamous intimate relationship is likely to desire to bring their partner a great deal of pleasure and support (note how this desire focuses on the partner’s good). A somewhat less generous person is more likely to desire to be pleased and supported by their partner (note the emphasis on their own good, which is likely to at least be compatible with their partner’s good). A still less generous person is more likely to have the exclusionary desire that the two of them be the *only* ones to please and support each other (note the underlying concern with excluding others, rather than benefiting either of the partners, which is less likely to be compatible with the partner’s good). While their familiarity may make us hesitate to *condemn* such an exclusionary desire (maybe for good reason, as I discuss later), focusing only on the parenthetical material clarifies and confirms how to rank these desires in terms of generosity; the exclusionary desire is too much like that of an abuser who isolates their partner from family, friends, and colleagues to surpass the other desires in generosity. Diverging even further from virtue, an extremely ungenerous, stingy, or selfish person is more likely to desire to receive pleasure and support *instead of* their partner (note the exclusion *within* this toxic relationship) or to simply deny their partner pleasure and support (note the ill will).

Furthermore, while some very generous people may desire some of the same objects as significantly less generous people, they will often desire them under different guises. For generosity is not only reflected in one’s actions and desires, but also the reasons one brings to bear in desiring things under specific guises. It is more generous to desire to compliment one’s partner under the description “give my partner pleasure,” “reward my partner’s accomplishments,” or “cement our bond” than “outshine my partner’s unappreciative exes.”

Of course, virtuous people recognize that not everyone can have everything that they want all the time. Nevertheless, all other things being equal, generous people prefer that more desires be satisfied rather than fewer (so long as the desires are not evil, insane, or otherwise problematic).[[26]](#footnote-26) But since an exclusionary desire just is one the satisfaction of which precludes others from having a good, the more exclusionary desires in a community, the more desires that will remain unsatisfied. Thus, generous people also have a *prima facie* reason to want there to be fewer exclusionary desires throughout their community, so that more desires can be satisfied.

Therefore, because generosity is a virtue, and because generous people generally avoid having exclusionary desires and prefer that others avoid them, there is a *prima facie* reason for us to avoid having exclusionary desires. I am not claiming that generous people *never* have exclusionary desires, just that generous people generally avoid them.[[27]](#footnote-27)

People who resist this conclusion might point out, correctly, that people can be generous in some domains but not others. There are people who are generous with their money, but not their time; with family members, but not strangers; or when working, but not when playing games. So, one might think, generous people can have many exclusionary desires, if only in a narrow range of contexts. For example, one might say that generous people avoid exclusionary desires except in the context of games and romantic relationships, since common sense says that exclusionary desires are valuable (and maybe inevitable) in those domains.

However, the empirical research on competition cited earlier is relevant here; it shows that we should not simply trust commonsense views about the value of competition and zero-sum thinking, even and especially in romantic relationships, sports, school, etc. The literature indicates that commonsense does not recognize the negative consequences of competition, even in these narrow domains, so it probably does not recognize the related costs of exclusionary desires that many people have been socialized to see as normal. Nor does commonsense recognize the alternative ways of organizing our social world that would reduce competition and exclusionary desires, possibilities discussed at length by Kohn (and others).

Furthermore, as already indicated, generosity (like other virtues) is not an all or nothing affair. People who are generous in more different domains are more generous in one important sense. Those with fewer exclusionary desires, even regarding games and intimate relationships, are more generous (in one sense) than otherwise similar people who have more exclusionary desires in those domains. Of course, *acting* generously is also important to being generous, and one can act generously while having many ungenerous desires, including many exclusionary ones. But acting generously *and* having many generous desires (including few exclusionary ones), makes one more generous than merely acting generously. So I am not convinced that the most generous people can have lots of exclusionary desires, even if their exclusionary desires are restricted to a narrow range of domains.

Another possible objection is that we should pay attention to people with *all* the virtues, not just generosity, and that what truly virtuous people desire is not that everyone gets as many good things as possible or that as many desires as possible be satisfied, but rather both (a) that people deserve good things and (b) that people get what they deserve. For truly virtuous people balance generosity with fairness (and other virtues). So, one might say, virtuous people would have lots of exclusionary desires, because they would want the person who deserves the best (or most, or only one of some good) to get it.

I agree that we should emulate fully virtuous people, but what are they like? The proposal above relies on a substantive view of how virtuous people would think about desert, which I want to resist. For, contra the suggestion in (b) above, just because a virtuous person desires something for another does not mean that they necessarily do or should believe that the other deserves it, especially if deserving something involves earning it. Parents can desire good things for their children without believing that their children deserve them, and people can desire forgiveness that they do not think they deserve. In many cases, these seem to be virtuous desires. So the question is whether we *should* ever desire that people receive undeserved goods.

I think that yes, virtuous people sometimes desire that others acquire goods without believing that they deserve them; virtuous people often desire that people receive *more than* what they deserve, not merely what they deserve. For example, virtuous people might desire that students get scholarships on the basis of need, not merit, even if merit determines desert. Virtuous people might desire that criminals be given rehab and job training, even if they do not deserve them, because the whole community benefits when recidivism is reduced, or because virtuous people are generous with their forgiveness and with second chances. For virtuous people recognize that sometimes, it is only by receiving undeserved goods that it becomes possible for people to do what will make them deserving of good things.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Furthermore, a generous person gives others the benefit of the doubt, including when making judgments about who deserves what. Generous people err on the side of assuming that others deserve good things. So I do not agree that virtuous people only (or even mostly) desire that people get the good things that they deserve, and I maintain that virtuous people would generally (though maybe not entirely) avoid exclusionary desires, and that we should too, when we can do so without sacrificing other important values.

**4. Objections**

I have made two arguments for that claim that we have moral reasons to substantially reduce exclusionary desires, addressing a few objections along the way. Now I want to consider a couple more objections in greater detail.

*4.1 The Excellence Objection*

First, let us consider an objection to the competition argument, which is meant to show that the many negative consequences of competition give us reason to significantly reduce exclusionary desires. However, even if one agrees that desires are in principle rationally revisable and thus things for which we are morally responsible, one might object to the competition argument by saying that it fails to take into account a positive consequence of competition and its accompanying exclusionary desires, one that outweighs the negative ones. Specifically, one might say that superlative feats of human ingenuity, strength, etc. would rarely, if ever, be achieved without the motivating force of exclusionary desires. On this view, exclusionary desires are an important protection against mediocrity and conformity; the key role that they play in advancing human knowledge, athletic ability, and other forms of excellence outweighs most (or all) of their badness. This line of thinking has substantial intuitive force and merits careful consideration.

However, this objection is flawed, and for reasons beyond those in Kohn’s empirical repudiation of the similar claim that *competition* is necessary for, or even the most reliable means of achieving, excellence. I will discuss three responses, in order of increasing importance.

First, when presented abstractly, this objection obscures questions about whether we are correct to characterize the particular “superlative feats” we have in mind as excellent. What we characterize as excellent is partly a product of socialization, and so the intuitive force of the excellence objection itself is partly a product of socialization. However, for any thing characterized as excellent, we might, upon rational reflection, decide that it is not. Many people do enjoy or admire a competitive spirit, the exclusionary desires that partially constitute it, and their benefits in our contingent social system, but that does not mean that we *should*.[[29]](#footnote-29)

One reason to be at least somewhat skeptical is that any form of excellence comes at a cost. We tend to assume that culturally valued forms of excellence are worth their costs, and this questionable assumption seems to undergird the excellence objection. For instance, some of the most vaunted forms of excellence in my culture are those demonstrated by professional athletes, like Tom Brady. In my experience, athletic forms of excellence are generally the first to be mentioned by people who want to defend exclusionary desires from the competition argument by invoking excellence. However, social scientists have provided evidence that some athletic forms of excellence are associated with (and may sometimes both feed on and perpetuate) a social system rife with violence and aggression; sexist, racist, ableist, and other injustices; socioeconomic inequality; and other ills.[[30]](#footnote-30) So even if we all agree that Brady is an excellent quarterback, we can and do disagree about whether his form of excellence is worthy of the praise it receives.[[31]](#footnote-31) We can and do disagree about whether the benefits of his kind of excellence are worth it for individual athletes like Brady, and for communities as wholes.[[32]](#footnote-32) The same is true of many other culturally valued forms of excellence (like excellence at taking standardized tests), so a claim about the “benefits” that we owe to the motivating force of the exclusionary desires that drive us to compete is insufficient reason to believe that any exclusionary desires are good (or neutral) unless one also successfully argues that the ends for which we compete and the means by which we do so really are good ones. Given the empirical literature about the costs of competition, I have my doubts about the prospects of that strategy. Nevertheless, my doubts may be misplaced. Fortunately, my next two responses to the excellence objection are more decisive.

Second, this objection assumes that *but for* the motivating force of an exclusionary desire, humans would not, or not nearly as often, attain excellence. This is an empirical claim about the motivational efficacy of exclusionary desires in comparison to other desires, but I know of no empirical evidence supporting it (if anything, the research on competition cited above tells against it). More to the point, I have not been able to find any empirical studies specifically about exclusionary desires at all. However, I do hope that social scientists will take up exclusionary desires as an object of study.[[33]](#footnote-33) Of course, if empirical evidence is produced to show that (a) exclusionary desires cause people to perform more excellently in general or in specific domains, or (b) that a lack of exclusionary desires prevents or inhibits excellence in general or in specific domains, then I will certainly modify my view accordingly.

In saying this, I do not merely want to shift the burden of proof, for there is evidence that people can and do excel in the absence of exclusionary desires. Attending to the diversity of non-exclusionary desires highlights the implausibility of claiming otherwise. For one thing, a strong non-exclusionary desire to be *my* best at some endeavor seems capable of motivating me to achieve whatever excellence I am capable of in that domain, contra the claim that but for the motivating force of an exclusionary desire, humans would not attain excellence nearly as often (or not at all). More crucially, some of humanity’s greatest achievements seem to have been attained because people wanted a certain task to be completed for its own sake, or for the good consequences that everyone could share upon its completion. For example, it is plausible to think that Larry Itliong’s, Dolores Huerta’s, and César Chávez’s desires for justice were sufficient to motivate them to form the United Farm Workers of America, that Marie Curie’s desire to know the truth was enough to motivate her to develop a theory of radioactivity, and that Jonas Salk’s desire to protect public health was adequate motivation to develop his polio vaccine.[[34]](#footnote-34) Even if these people had exclusionary desires in addition to the non-exclusionary ones listed, I see no reason to think that it was impossible for them to have completed their feats without exclusionary desires, or even that having exclusionary desires (would have) helped them achieve excellence.

To anticipate a question, it is probably true that for some people, exclusionary desires are more motivating in some situations than non-exclusionary ones. My claim is that we should minimize exclusionary desires to the extent that we are psychologically able to, when it does not require the sacrifice of other equally or more important values. This is perfectly compatible with saying that (a) eliminating exclusionary desires will not be equally easy for everyone and (b) the costs of eliminating exclusionary desires will not be equal for everyone, and thus (c) it is morally acceptable for some people to have more exclusionary desires than others.

Third, and finally, this objection seems to assume that when we deem something excellent, we necessarily use that term in a comparative way. The idea seems to be that we have to determine what is excellent by “grading on a curve,” which rules out the possibility that everyone could attain excellence. Though some forms of excellence are like that, we can challenge that general claim. When we call Tom Brady an excellent quarterback, we probably mean that he is a better quarterback than most or all others. But some excellence is different. One could be an excellent knower by knowing a lot and having few or no false or unjustified beliefs, even if everyone else were also an excellent knower. One can exhibit excellence in the domain of justice by thinking, feeling, and doing many just (and few or no unjust) things, even if everyone is similarly excellent. In fact, when it comes to knowledge, justice, and even health, the excellence of others around you tends to facilitate your excellence.

I think that knowledge, justice, health, and other goods (like humor and beauty), are some of the most valuable things there are, and yet my having them does not preclude your having them. They are not scarce in principle, only in fact.[[35]](#footnote-35) They improve the quality of life of both those who possess them and their community members. They can propagate across space and time through socialization even when material goods are fairly scarce, and can exist in varied social, political, and material conditions. Furthermore, some of them distinguish moral agents like us from mere moral patients and objects. Therefore, I think that excellence in these domains should be prioritized over excellence relative to exclusionary and positional goods.

*4.2 The Altruism Objection*

Now let us consider an objection to the generosity argument, which is meant to show that having exclusionary desires undermines one’s generosity (and thus one’s virtue), since having such desires entails, in effect, desiring that others be denied something good. One might object that an exclusionary desire can be morally good, and even generous, when one wants to achieve a superlative status or attain a unique good *for the sake of another*. For instance, I might want to be the best possible friend or partner to a loved one, or the best teacher for my students, for their sakes.[[36]](#footnote-36) One might call such desires morally praiseworthy insofar as desiring something good for another’s sake is paradigmatically altruistic.

There is something to be said for this objection. If we look at all exclusionary desires, this altruistic subset does seem morally better than the rest. However, even if I want to be the best x *for the sake of another*, this does not necessarily mean that I want to be better than any other; not all desires described thus are comparative in an interpersonal way. I might want to be the best x *that I can be* (for the sake of another), which is not an exclusionary desire.

But if it is a comparative desire (as in, “I want to be a better x than all y for the sake of z”), then even though it may seem admirable, such a desire is worrisome for a few reasons. First, as discussed, it is functionally equivalent to wanting that others be denied something good. Second, certain morally significant sacrifices tend to follow from wanting to be *the best* (comparatively) for another’s sake; such desires often cause people to sacrifice their own welfare, autonomy, or morally valuable relationships and projects. Such desires also often motivate people to offload costs onto third parties. Third, insofar as one might want to be the best *in a certain role* for another, I doubt that there is a single best friend, partner, teacher, or parent out of everyone who might fill that role for any given individual. For while we humans need relationships with others to flourish, there are in principle many combinations of relationships with different people that would satisfy our needs and desires equally well.

So far, I have considered how the altruism objection relates to the desire to be the best for a specific other (or group). But one might ask: why would it be bad for someone to have an exclusionary desire if its fulfillment would be best for *everyone*? For instance, someone might have the exclusionary desires to be the next US President. Certainly a specific candidate’s winning might be best overall, in which case, they should desire to win.

However, considering the description under which the candidate desires to win shows that either it is (1) a desire to bring about what is best for everyone, (2) a problematic exclusionary desire, or (3) both of these distinct desires at once.

If the candidate wants to win to bring about the most good overall, then they frame the situation as a positive-sum (not zero-sum) game, in which, even if the other candidates do not win the presidency, they would win the good that the candidate desires, which is the best overall state of affairs. In that case, the candidate only desires the presidency, if at all, as a means to another end. The candidate’s desire is most accurately described as a desire for the best state of affairs for all concerned, which is not an exclusionary desire.[[37]](#footnote-37) So I think this is a case in which, by understanding the candidate’s reasoning and thus the description under which they desire something, we find that they do not have an exclusionary desire at all. However, even if you decide that the candidate’s desire should be classed as an exclusionary one (because there is *a* description under which it qualifies), assuming that (a) it is not morally wrong to desire the best overall state of affairs, (b) the candidate correctly judges that their winning is necessary to bring about the best state of affairs overall, (c) the candidate would not be able to bring out the best state of affairs without desiring the necessary means to do so, and (d) the candidate would not desire the means if they did not desire that end, then, on my type of view, you can still say that this exclusionary desire cannot be eliminated without sacrificing an equally or more important value (in this case, that of the best overall state of affairs), and thus that this desire should not incur moral criticism.

However, if the candidate desires to win the presidency as such, for its own sake, or to attain superlative power, fame, or what have you, then the fulfillment of that desire would exclude all others from having the desired good, making the situation into a zero-sum game. Only if such an exclusionary desire is present (whether in combination with non-exclusionary desires or not) do I see a problem.[[38]](#footnote-38)

**5. Exclusionary Desires & Blame**

If I am correct about exclusionary desires being morally problematic, then we must consider what we ought to *do* in response. Should we blame individuals whenever they have exclusionary desires? No. I think that in some odd cases we should blame individuals for having specific exclusionary desires, but in general we should not (or at least not much). There are a few reasons why we generally should not blame individuals for having exclusionary desires. Depending on one’s preferred theory of blame, one may see some, but not all, of these as reasons not to blame people (at all or not much) for their exclusionary desires. However, I suspect that everyone will find some intuitive plausibility in at least one of the following.

First, under current conditions, most people have not been socialized to think about their having exclusionary desires and why they do. Even if they had been, most people simply do not have the luxury to spend much time examining and assessing their desires. So most people are only dimly and partially (if at all) aware of having exclusionary desires. This is one reason to mitigate any blame that we might direct at them for having exclusionary desires, since, all other things being equal, we have more reason to blame individuals for what they are aware of thinking, feeling, and doing than for what they are unaware of thinking, feeling, and doing.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Second, insofar as people are aware of having exclusionary desires, they tend to be only dimly and partially, if at all, aware of their badness. This militates against claims that they *intentionally* bring about whatever harms their exclusionary desires cause. And all other things being equal, we have more reason to blame people when they cause harms intentionally, so this is another reason to reduce any blame that we might direct at individuals for their exclusionary desires.

Third, we, as third parties, should be cautious about apportioning blame for exclusionary desire, because we, as third parties, tend to lack the knowledge needed to make our blaming appropriate. We are generally unable to distinguish others’ exclusionary desires from similar non-exclusionary desires, because we tend not to know the descriptions under which people desire things. This is not a point about the epistemic standing of the subject of the exclusionary desire (as above), but rather about the epistemic standing of the (potentially) blaming subject. The idea is that humility, coupled with a lack of relevant knowledge, gives us another reason not to blame individuals for having specific exclusionary desires.

Fourth, even if and when we can identify who has which exclusionary desires, the fact that it would in principle be possible to rationally revise those desires does not mean that it will be easy to do so or that individuals are likely to succeed in doing so. Desires, whether exclusionary or not, can be recalcitrant, resisting our best efforts to reform them. This gives us some reason to save blame for cases in which people could more easily reform their actions or attitudes. However, even if a lack of full, direct control over our desires can give us some reason to refrain from *blaming* individuals for their desires, that does not mean that people are not morally *responsible* for them.

Fifth, we humans have limited time, energy, and other resources, so we have good reason to allocate our resources in such a way as to more effectively, efficiently, and reliably bring about the results we seek. Efforts to reduce exclusionary desires seem more likely to be successful if we focus on change at the social level rather than the individual level. For it is, at best, rare that we can change our desires through mere force of will. Generally, our desires change because of changes to our beliefs, values, or situational factors, which are not generally under our full or direct voluntary control. When the social landscape changes, the beliefs, values, and situational features that influence our desires adjust with it, and these social changes influence many people simultaneously. So confronting the root causes of our exclusionary desires seems to be the best way to reduce their prevalence, rather than taking the piecemeal approach of singling out individuals for blame on the basis of specific exclusionary desires.

For example, in graduate school I had an exclusionary desire to earn my PhD faster than my peers. I thought (and still think) that this was a fairly stupid desire to have, but I could not will it away; surely my socialization regarding academic competition partly explains my having it. With that in mind, I try to de-emphasize competition among my own students, to socialize younger generations to measure themselves against personal or absolute goals instead of other people. Such strategies do not show immediate or guaranteed results, but to the extent that they succeed, they confront the root causes of exclusionary desires.

So I think that in general, we should expend whatever resources we decide to expend on long-term, broad-scale social reform that will reduce the prevalence of exclusionary desires in the future, rather than looking backward to assign blame to individuals for their exclusionary desires. However, that does not mean that I think there are *no* cases in which blaming an individual for a specific exclusionary desire would be appropriate.

Even though we are unused to saying that people are blameworthy because of their exclusionary desires, I think there are cases in which fairly common intuitions would support such a judgment. For example, imagine a young child’s birthday party. An adult brings the child a nice gift, and a smaller gift for the child’s sibling. If the birthday child says “I want all the gifts” or “I don’t want her to get any,” the adults might chastise the child for being ungenerous. Many of us believe that they would be correct to do so. For, from a moral perspective, there is something bad (specifically, selfish) about wanting to deny a sibling a gift.[[40]](#footnote-40) Many adults would try to teach the child not to have that desire in the first place, and failing that, to suppress or more productively deal with it. We try to show children that our desire to be valued (which is more important than the desire for gifts) can be satisfied even if others also receive gifts, attention, and love.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Alternatively, I know of cases in which people have criticized students for wanting to be the only one in their class to ace a test, athletes for wanting to outperform their own teammates, and adults for wanting to have more money than their loved ones. In these cases, critics think of such desires as inappropriate, counter-productive, or excessive, and/or that the good of the group should be prioritized over the good of an individual. In at least some of the cases I have in mind, I think blame was appropriate. So I do think that on rare occasions, blaming someone (maybe ourselves) for having an exclusionary desire is appropriate, and that some familiar practices are consistent with that claim.

Since this means that we are blameworthy for more things than commonly thought, I am bound to face some familiar criticisms of any such view. Some people will see my view as linked to a problematically pessimistic, judgmental, or holier-than-thou attitude. However, my view is perfectly compatible with its adherents recognizing that, like others, they have exclusionary desires and, to that extent, are no better than others. Furthermore, insofar as I advise against blaming people for exclusionary desires in most cases, I think my view is more forgiving and forward-looking than judgmental. Moreover, I think it is respectful to affirm people’s agency by holding them responsible for the thoughts, feelings, and actions that reflect their evaluative judgments.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Other critics will see my view as counterproductive, because they think that people are already overwhelmed by their moral responsibilities and less likely to live up to them if they feel an even greater weight of moral responsibility. This is an empirical claim, and one that we have some reasons to reject. For there is a fair bit of research demonstrating that people tend to do what others around them do and what is expected of them, regardless of demandingness.[[43]](#footnote-43)

While I think those criticisms of my view are misplaced, this is good opportunity to clarify an important point. Exclusionary desires are worth discussing because of their prevalence in many areas of life and the relatively little academic attention they have received, not because they are *always seriously* morally problematic. I am not making any claims about exclusionary desires being on par with, or worse than, any other type of thought, feeling, or action. This is partly because the moral seriousness of exclusionary desires varies greatly across cases.

Another reason why I think exclusionary desires merit our attention relates to collective action problems, the prevalence and seriousness of which are defining features of our age (think climate change). Exclusionary desires are obstacles to solving many collective action problems, because they encourage us to think of ourselves as atomistic individuals, rather than members of groups, and they motivate us to seek what is individually rational rather than collectively rational. Thus, reducing exclusionary desires may make it somewhat easier to solve some collective action problems.

But to reiterate, I endorse reducing exclusionary desires by adjusting the background conditions that make them most likely to arise. So in practice, the minimization of exclusionary desires depends, in part, on satisfying at least people’s basic needs. This is because an exclusionary desire for say, the last ration of grain, when one needs it to preserve a life, is among the most justifiable exclusionary desires there are. But if all basic needs were met, such a desire would not arise, and the only remaining exclusionary desires would be for things that people could live well without.

**6. Conclusion**

In the preceding, I have isolated a class of desires, which I call exclusionary desires. These are desires for things under descriptions such that, were the desires satisfied, it would be logically impossible for people other than the desiring subjects to possess the desired objects. Exclusionary desires are pervasive and merit much greater attention in the philosophical and empirical literature than they have received thus far.

I have argued that we have multiple reasons to think that such desires are generally morally problematic and so should be avoided when it is possible to do so without sacrificing other important values. I have proposed that the appropriate response to exclusionary desires is generally not to blame the individuals who have them, but rather to pursue social reforms that will reduce the prevalence of such desires in our communities over time.

Doing so would have significant implications for many aspects of our lives, especially our intimate relationships. There is far more to say about that than can be said here, but debates about the value of exclusivity in relationships are somewhat structurally similar to debates about the value of competition in sports. As in sporting cases, my worries about the status quo relate to defining excellence (in relationships),[[44]](#footnote-44) weighing benefits and costs of various forms of excellence (in relationships), and empirical claims about how exclusionary desires do or do not motivate us to achieve excellence (in our relationships). My primary concern is about the possibility that exclusionary desires undermine intimate relationships and harm the people in them. But that discussion will have to be continued elsewhere.[[45]](#footnote-45)

*Department of Philosophy & Religious Studies, Ball State University*

rlfredericks@bsu.edu

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1. See *De Anima* III.10 (433a28–29), where Aristotle focuses on objects of desire, and *Nicomachean* *Ethics* I.1 (1094a1–3), where he focuses on aims of actions and pursuits. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Velleman 1992, Boyle and Lavin 2010, and Moss 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Claim (a) just means that we desire things under particular descriptions. For instance, I usually want a cup of coffee under the description “a tasty beverage,” but not “a caffeinated drink,” since caffeine makes me unpleasantly jittery. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The exceptions are when people desire to *share* something that is somehow the best. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Specifically, I favor Angela Smith’s rational relations view, though my position is meant to be consistent with at least some similar accounts. Her view is developed in Smith 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2012, and 2015. For other rationalist views, see Arpaly 2006, Hieronymi 2008, and Scanlon 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Here we could distinguish between desires and attractions, as in Martin 2013, and then say that the desire dissipates, but the attraction remains. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. People seem pretty poor at identifying (first- *or* third-personally) the description under which someone desires something. As some people learn in therapy, it can be hard to identify what one desires, let alone the description under which one desires it. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. If one desires something for the sake of something else (that is, desires it instrumentally, as a means), then the description under which one desires it makes that salient. However, even things one desires as ends are desired under specific descriptions. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This comparative claim does not imply that wanting white teeth or to avoid jail are morally bad, nor that desiring something under one description precludes *also* desiring it under another. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The extensive literature on positional goods (like forms of status that people desire to have *relatively* *more of* than others) supports this. However, while many desires for positional goods are exclusionary, not all are. For more on positional goods, a good starting place is Frank 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. If we follow Frank in thinking that concern for positional goods is generally adaptive for individuals, *but often maladaptive for the species*, that complicates claims about exclusionary desires being hard-wired and valuable, given debates about the level at which natural selection occurs. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For example, many contemporary Americans are socialized to value only *exclusive* sexual relationships. Similarly, social and cultural institutions (like sports organizations) are adept at inculcating beliefs about the value of being “the best” relative to competitors. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I use ‘change’ and ‘revise’ interchangeably (though the former may seem to imply a more passive process), because I think that desires are products of rational activity, though that rational activity can feel more or less like an active process, as discussed in Smith 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Fry and Passel 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. On the distinction between being intrinsically valuable and being valued as an end, see Korsgaard 1983. She argues that something can be valued as an end without being intrinsically valuable when it is conditionally valuable and the conditions of its goodness are met. On her view, both conditionally valuable things whose conditions are met and unconditionally (intrinsically) valuable things are objectively valuable. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Kohn 1986: 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Kohn 1986: 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Kulik, O’Fallon, and Salimath 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Anderman and Murdock 2007: 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Feltovich and Ejebu 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Watermeyer and Olssen 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See, for example, Levine 2013, Meeghan 2010, Norton and Sommers 2011, and Zatz 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Cudd 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Jan Boxill also defends competition, focusing on how it fosters friendship and collaboration; see Boxill 2003a and 2003b. A good starting place for more reading on this subject is Kretchmar 2012, which contains many relevant citations. See also Landkammer and Sassenberg 2016, which discusses “co-opetitive” situations in which one must simultaneously co-operate and compete with the very same people to achieve a goal (unlike in intergroup competition, in which one must simultaneously cooperate with certain people and compete with others). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. For some Kantian reasons to be skeptical about the moral value of competitive sports, see Russell 2014, especially his discussion of partisan vs. non-partisan success and his claim that competitive sports institutionalize a corrupt idea of value that prioritizes relative excellence over excellence for its own sake. See also Cawston 2016 for arguments that competition (specifically in the professions) is fundamentally in tension with core feminist values. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. One might ask whether generous people would desire for their romantic/sexual partners to have satisfied desires for additional romantic/sexual partners, since the result would be more people having more good things. The answer depends on whether having and satisfying such a desire would actually be a good thing for the partner overall. And that depends on a wide range of empirical facts about their unique psychology, factors specific to their social community, the time they have available for romantic/sexual activities, and probably even biological factors, like those relating to sex drive, among others. But in some cases (though I would not want to hazard a guess about how many), the answer will be “yes.” [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Virtuous people may be most likely to have exclusionary desires when available evidence indicates that doing so is one of the best ways (or only way) to bring about some highly valuable good in that situation. For example, if one were forced into a one-on-one battle to the death, having an exclusionary desire to win seems at least acceptable, and maybe even virtuous. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. All living adults received unearned good things as infants, which we, in some sense, did not deserve. So whatever goods we deserve now, we were able to earn them only because we already received unearned goods. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See Lyons 1976 on the tendency to ask whether someone performed an activity excellently rather than whether the activity performed was an excellent one, and defense of the claim that “There is no simple correlation between competitive spirit and the likelihood of true achievement” (292). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. For a sampling of relevant empirical literature, see the papers (and citations) in McKay, Messner, and Sabo 2000 and the summaries of studies in Doty 2006. For a brief discussion of how problems in college athletics are connected to broader social problems, see Hanford and Greenberg 2003: B10. Even in the absence of supporting literature, my suggestion would have intuitive plausibility insofar as athletes and athletic organizations would probably not have such prominent, enduring status in our culture unless (to some extent) they both supported and benefited from existing social structures (which are not entirely just). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. This is not a critique of any excellent individual athlete, but of a social system that influences athletes (in some ways and to some degree), and in which excellent athletes have a particularly significant influence. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. For one thing, it seems unjust to athletes themselves that we ask them (and offer them temptingly huge quantities of money and prestige) to repeatedly do what we know to be profoundly damaging to their bodies for our entertainment. See Russell 2014 for more on the conflict between athletic and moral excellence. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. One can find some research that uses the phrase ‘exclusionary desire’ to describe desires *to exclude x from y*, which is not equivalent to how I use it. I would call those desires *to* exclude, since exclusion is their object, not a description of their character. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See Helmreich, Beane, Lucker, and Spence 1978: 225 for evidence that “the highest [scientific] attainment is associated with low and not high competitiveness.” [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Subsistence material goods like nutritious food, clean water, and adequate shelter are also among the most important and not scarce in principle; in theory, everyone could have sufficient material goods. Moreover, some unlimited abstract goods (like justice) generally forbid us from denying subsistence goods to others, which is another reason to value those goods more than positional goods, which necessarily create competition and exclusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. I focus on what Bernard Williams called “I-desires:” desires that I, the desiring subject, attain a good or do something. In contrast, the propositional content of non-I-desires does not require ‘I’ or related expressions. Note that even if one wants *for someone else* to be the best, most, or only one who possesses some good (as when a parent wants their child to be the best), one still wants something that excludes others from having it, so my criticisms apply equally to exclusionary I-desires and exclusionary non-I-desires. See Williams 1976: 261. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. The same would go for the desire to run the best campaign they can, to successfully communicate their vision for the country, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. For I consider it morally preferable for potential public servants to prioritize the common good over the goods that accrue to themselves alone. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. However, if social changes made people more aware of their exclusionary desires, and if people had the resources necessary to examine and assess their desires, this could become a culpable lack of awareness. Ongoing debates about whether we should blame racists, sexists, and similar others from the distant past are relevant here, since they turn on parallel questions about culpability for socially-supported ignorance. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Someone might find it inappropriate to blame children and so prefer to think of this case as involving a teachable moment, a mere request for justification, or a criticism that falls short of blame. Those views, which turn on the specifics of the account of blame we prefer, are worth considering, but beyond this paper’s scope. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. This case highlights a fascinating pattern. In my experience, adults prioritize teaching young children the importance and value of sharing, lessons seen as crucial to children’s development. But after a certain age, that emphasis on sharing (a kind of non-competition) seems not only to diminish, but to be actively contradicted by an increasing emphasis on the supposed value of competition in sports and for grades, material goods, popularity, sexual partners, and so on. If that pattern is not just an artifact of my idiosyncratic experience, then what does it say about us that we hold children to a higher standard than adults when it comes to sharing? Usually we are more lenient in the moral demands we make of children than adults. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. See Smith 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See Singer 1972: 237–38 and Lichtenberg 2014: Chapter 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. For discussion of the variety of caring relationships (including non-exclusive ones) that can be excellent, see Brake 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. I am grateful to Justin D’Arms, Alison Duncan Kerr, Jeremy Fischer, Judith Lichtenberg, Theresa Lopez, Jennifer Morton, Michele Davide Ombrato, Krista Thomason, an audience at the November 2015 Indiana Philosophical Association meeting, my colleagues and students in the Ball State University Department of Philosophy & Religious Studies, and two anonymous reviewers for helpful discussion of these issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)