

A Losing Game: Clarifying and Informing Debates on Positional Competition

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Abstract: This paper takes issue with the widespread claim that positional competitions are zero-sum games. It shows how the notions of ‘positional good’ and ‘positional competition’ have changed in meaning and how this has resulted in conceptual confusion in discussions amongst economists and philosophers. I argue that the Zero-Sum Claim is hardly ever true when it comes to the novel understanding of positionality that currently dominates the philosophical literature. I propose dropping the Zero-Sum Claim and construing positional competitions as win-lose. This is conceptually clearer and deepens our understanding and ethical evaluation of these important competitions in contemporary societies.

Keywords: positional competition; positional good; zero-sum; win-lose; income; status

1. Introduction

A house may be large or small; as long as the surrounding houses are equally small, it satisfies all social demands for a dwelling. But if a palace rises besides the little house, the little house shrinks into a hut. ... [T]he occupant of the relatively small house will feel more and more uncomfortable, dissatisfied and cramped within its four walls. (Marx 1849 [2010]: 216)

Competitions for money, power and status form a substantial part of life. Applicants compete for jobs, employees for promotions, politicians for (the largest number of) votes and many of us compete for status by buying and flaunting status goods (such as ever-larger houses). These competitions have been labelled ‘positional competitions’, as they revolve around obtaining what has become known as ‘positional goods’. In this paper, I will show how the meaning of these notions has evolved over time and has been used in multiple, often incompatible, ways in debates amongst both economists and philosophers. In particular, I will focus on the claim that positional competitions are zero-sum games (Brighthouse and Swift 2006; Fishkin 2014; Grolleau et al. 2012; Heath 2018; Hirsch 1976 [1999]; Kolodny 2010; Pagano 1999; Wilkinson and Pickett 2018).

The problem is that different theorists in the literature use the same terms—‘positional competition’ and ‘positional goods’ being ‘zero-sum’—but do not talk about the same phenomena. This leads to confusions and misunderstandings that have remained unrecognised up until now. ‘Positional competition’, as coined by economist Fred Hirsch in 1976, took on a life of its own, which has led to different understandings of the same term. As I will show, the predominantly used in the philosophical literature has diverged so much from the one used by economists that those adhering to the philosophical understanding cannot meaningfully speak of positional competitions as zero-sum games anymore. In this paper, I argue that those who want to use the philosophical understanding of *actual* positional competitions that people face on a daily basis need to drop the idea that positional competitions are ‘zero-sum’. This notion fails to capture what it is that characterises positional competition in its philosophical sense: that one party can be made better off only by making another party worse off.

My conceptual solution to this conundrum will be to think of positional competitions more broadly as *win-lose games*. This not only captures what is characteristic of positional

competition but also has important implications for the philosophical literature—for example, for discussions on the conditions under which positional competitions are desirable or not and whether or not levelling down can be justified in the case of positional goods.

The aim of this paper, then, is to argue for an alternative understanding of positional competition as a win-lose game, which, in turn, will both make the concept of ‘positional competition’ more accurate and expand its scope (that is, more phenomena will plausibly be represented by this new conception). The advantage of identifying a distinct philosophical understanding of positional competition as a win-lose game is that it facilitates a more nuanced discussion on the desirability of and fairness in (actual) positional competitions (e.g. in politics, the labour market and education).

First, I will present how different influential authors describe positional goods as zero-sum goods and positional competitions as zero-sum games. I will classify these authors as either having an ‘economic’ or a ‘philosophical’ understanding (section 2). Then, I introduce why the Zero-Sum Claim is problematic for the philosophical understanding of positionality (section 3). Building on this, I proceed to highlight that the Zero-Sum Claim, understood in abstraction, fails to meaningfully say something about actual, real-life cases and fails to capture and isolate what is characteristic of positional competitions (section 4). Given these problems, I propose making a *Win-Lose Claim* when speaking of positional competition. This broader notion fits with the philosophical understanding of positional competitions, thereby providing the needed conceptual clarity in discussions on the desirability of (actual) positional competitions in debates on distributive justice (section 5). Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. Two Understandings of Positional Goods and Positional Competition

In this section, I spell out some of the key terminology and make a crucial distinction that has not yet been made explicitly in the literature so far, but that is needed to get a grip on discussions about positional competition. I will explain what positional goods and positional competitions are according to what I will call the ‘economic understanding’ (2.1.) and the ‘philosophical understanding’ (2.2.)¹ and point out crucial aspects in which they differ (2.3.). Both of these understandings employ what I call the Zero-Sum Claim.

The Zero-Sum Claim. Positional competition is necessarily a zero-sum game.

Strictly speaking, goods are zero-sum if their total amount is fixed (Grolleau et al. 2014: 464). A zero-sum *game*, then, refers to a situation in which the payoffs add up to zero; what one party gains is also exactly what the other loses (Kelly 2003: 6, 77). Both the economic and philosophical understandings make the Zero-Sum Claim, but, as I will show, only the former employs it strictly.

In what follows, I will go into both understandings of positional competition and show why this distinction helps to clear up some of the conceptual confusion that characterises discussions on positional competition.

2.1. The Economic Understanding

¹ My labels ‘economic’ and ‘philosophical’ understanding are roughly meant to indicate differences between Fred Hirsch’s original use of the concepts around positional goods and its later uses in the philosophical literature (notably after Brighouse and Swift’s (2006) adapted version of the terms). However, it should be noted that there are philosophers who use (elements of) the economic understanding and vice versa. The two labels are merely meant to move the debate forward by bringing to light some important substantive differences that have remained unrecognised until now.

The economist Fred Hirsch famously coined the terms ‘positional good’ and ‘positional competition’ in his influential 1976 book *Social Limits to Growth*. Hirsch’ core distinction was between material and positional goods (Hirsch 1976 [1999]: 27–28). According to Hirsch, access to material goods is a function of absolute real income and increases as the economy grows. In contrast, “[p]ositional goods are defined as those to which access is a function of an individual’s income relative to other people. General economic growth does not increase their availability” (Matthews 1977: 574). Hirsch calls such goods ‘positional’ because access to them is determined by one’s *position* in the distribution of income.

According to the economic understanding, positional goods have two interrelated aspects: (i) they are fixed-sum and (ii) access to them depends on relative income. Regarding (i) *fixed-sum* goods, their total amount cannot be expanded (Matthews 1977: 574–575). These “things in fixed supply” (Frank 1985: 8) are characterised by scarcity, which can be either *physical* or *social* in nature (Hirsch 1976 [1999]: 19–23).

Examples of physically scarce goods are paintings by old masters, natural landscapes (Hirsch 1976 [1999]: 19–21), diamonds (Frank 1985: 8) and beachfront properties. Many such goods are physically scarce because they are a limited natural resource (such as diamonds and land). Rembrandt paintings, in turn, are physically scarce because only the original works made by the master himself count; there are only so many of them.

Examples of socially scarce goods are sought-after jobs and leadership positions (Hirsch 1976 [1999]: 30, 41–51; Frank 1985: 8). These goods are limited in supply “not by physical but by social factors, including the satisfaction engendered by scarcity as such” (Hirsch 1976 [1999]: 20). One *could* divide different leadership tasks over a variety of people in a team; there are no physical limitations at play. However, this also takes away the reason that makes this one leadership position so desirable—the fact that only *one* person can occupy it and derive satisfaction and social status from it. This scarcity is socially constructed.

The second aspect revolves around (ii) *relative income*, which determines one’s access to these fixed-sum (oftentimes status) goods. Pursuing them inevitably involves positional externalities: if I move up the (relative income) ladder, you necessarily go down (Matthews 1977: 574–575). Scenic land in the countryside is fixed-sum (the first aspect of positional good), and access to this scarce status good (in the form of a holiday cottage) depends on your relative position in the income distribution (the second aspect of positional good). A rise in income, and thereby a higher position in the relative income distribution for person *A*, creates a positional externality for person *B*, now going down, relatively speaking. *A*’s increased access to the fixed-sum status good creates an equal loss in access to this good for *B*.

Now that we have an idea of what positional goods are according to the economic understanding, let us now move to positional competition. Hirsch defines it as follows:

By positional competition is meant competition that is fundamentally for a higher place within some explicit or implicit hierarchy and that thereby yields gains for some only by dint of losses for others. Positional competition, in the language of game theory, is a *zero-sum game*: *what winners win, losers lose*. (Hirsch 1976 [1999]: 52, emphasis added)²

Authors who understand positional goods and/or positional competition in this original economic sense also see them as zero-sum per definition. They endorse the Zero-Sum Claim.

² This definition shows that the textbook defence of market competition producing Pareto optimality is not applicable to positional competition, because in the latter kind of competition, any benefit for one person necessarily means an equal disadvantage for another person (Matthews 1977: 575). “What winners win, losers lose” (Hirsch 1976 [1999]: 52).

Pagano, for example (while not speaking of positional *competition* specifically), says the following about positional *goods*:

[I]n our two-person economy, ... if an individual i consumes x_i , the second individual must consume an equal but negative quantity $-x_i$. Thus, these types of goods are *zero-sum goods*. Following Hirsch, I will call this type of good a *positional good*. (Pagano 1999: 53, emphasis added)

Likewise, Grolleau et al. noted about the positional race (i.e. competition) for status:

Status results from one's standing or relative position in a rank ordered reference group and is considered as a *fixed amount resource*. Therefore, status seeking is frequently described as a paradigmatic *zero-sum game* where *what is gained by winners is exactly offset by what is lost by losers*. For example, in the 'top five percent', it is impossible to fit more than five percent; similarly, two runners cannot be first at the same time. (Grolleau et al. 2012: 464, emphasis added)

Finally, Joseph Heath (2018) also adopted the economic understanding of positional goods and positional competition. He characterised status as zero-sum and stated that any good consumed as a way of achieving status would be positional. The only way to increase the status of one person is by reducing the status of others, resulting in a net gain of zero. He endorsed the Zero-Sum Claim by concluding that status competition is *necessarily* a zero-sum game.

In sum, the economic literature, where debates on positional goods and competition originated, focuses on fixed-sum status goods that can only be accessed by improving one's relative position in the income distribution. I now move to the philosophical understanding of positionality (2.2.), show how it differs from the economic one and clear up some conceptual confusions and misunderstandings that arose when the meaning of positionality changed in the process (2.3.).

2.2. The Philosophical Understanding

In their 2006 paper *Equality, Priority, and Positional Goods*, Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift popularised a new definition of 'positional good' that differed from the economic one coined by Hirsch.³ According to them, "[p]ositional goods ... are goods the absolute value of which, to their possessors, depends on those possessors' place in the distribution of the good—on their relative standing with respect to the good in question" (Brighouse and Swift 2006: 474). I will refer to this definition as 'the philosophical understanding' because philosophers often use it in this way (see e.g. Harel Ben Shahar 2018; Fishkin 2014; Freiman 2014; Kolodny 2010).

Freiman, for example, noted that growth in the supply of a particular positional good comes at the expense of others who already possess this good, whose absolute value now decreases accordingly (2014: 343). Harel Ben Shahar wrote that positional goods are "good for the individual who has them wholly in virtue of his relative standing compared to others" (2018: 103). So here, positionality refers to the *value* that we attach to certain goods, which depends crucially on social and relative comparisons. Referring back to Marx's quote, how I value the size of my house depends on the size of the houses in the neighbourhood. If my neighbours decide to build a bigger house, mine becomes *relatively smaller*, even if I do not change anything about my house at all.

³ Until then, philosophers largely neglected the topic, exceptions being M. Hollis's *Education as a Positional Good* (1982) and *Positional Goods* (1984) and Goodin's *Relative Needs* (1990).

Many goods have both positional and non-positional aspects, however (Brighthouse and Swift 2006). The value of my house not only depends on its size in comparison to the neighbours' (which is positional), but it is also valuable independently of other people's house sizes (its non-positional aspect). It shelters from wind and rain and provides a place where people can feel home, which are things that do not depend on comparisons.⁴ For reasons of accuracy, I therefore prefer to speak of 'goods with positional value' rather than 'positional goods'.

According to the philosophical understanding, positional *competition* then refers to the struggle between different parties⁵ for relative advantage.⁶ In the case of housing, it refers to the rat race between homeowners for an ever-bigger house—or at least, bigger than the neighbours'—and the social status this confers.

2.3. Comparing the Two Understandings

There is general agreement between the economic and philosophical understandings that positional competitions entail hidden costs in welfare. As Hirsch famously noted, "If everyone stands on tiptoe, no one sees better" (1999: 5). Everyone spends (or wastes) an increasingly large amount of money and other resources on flaunting positional goods, although people's relative positions in the (status) hierarchy remain largely the same.

While both meanings aim to acquire a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of the rat race and the waste it involves, there are obvious differences in focus between the philosophical and the more narrowly conceived economic understanding of positionality. In the economic understanding, it is one's position in the *income* distribution that matters, which, in turn, can give you access to goods that are *fixed in supply*, such as a beachfront property.

This is not necessarily the case for the philosophical understanding, in which one's position in the distribution of a *good* is what is relevant (this *can* be income but extends to any good for which the relative position in that good's distribution matters). The *value* of this good *to its possessor* changes depending upon one's position in its distribution—that is, how many relevant others have goods of the same kind. How I value my beachfront house depends on how many of my peers have one as well and how it compares in relevant aspects (such as size). If more of my peers obtain (bigger) beachfront properties, then the relative value of mine decreases.

In the economic understanding, however, the value of such a property to an individual is not a function of how much beachfront property other people have. What makes it positional in the economic understanding is the fact that we cannot make more of these goods, and so the only way to obtain them is to increase one's relative income. This implies that the same goods can be positional in both understandings but for different reasons.

The central elements of the philosophical understanding that are not part of the economic one are the following: (i) positionality is about one's position in the distribution of the *good* itself (beyond income), and (ii) it is about the *value* of the good *to its possessor*, not about the good being fixed-sum. In the schematic overview below (Table 1), I list the main distinction and apply it to the beachfront property example.

Table 1

Overview of the economic and philosophical understanding of positional goods

Economic understanding	Philosophical understanding
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⁴ Cf. Goodin (1990), who makes a similar distinction, but instead of calling them 'positional' and 'non-positional aspects', he talks of relative and absolute needs for goods such as food, clothing and housing.

⁵ By 'parties' I mean individuals and social groups such as teams, corporations and nations.

⁶ The definition of 'positional competition' by Philip Brown as "how one stands relative to others within an implicit or explicit hierarchy" (Brown 2000: 633) misses the distinctively *competitive* element.

Positional goods are <i>fixed-sum</i> goods. Access to them depends on one's position in the distribution of <i>income</i> .	Positional goods are those whose <i>value to their possessor</i> depends on their position in the distribution of the <i>good</i> .
Beachfront property is positional, because it is fixed-sum; one cannot make more of it. Access to it depends on one's relative <i>income</i> .	While beachfront property is fixed-sum, what makes it positional is that its value to its possessor depends on the extent to which others have beachfront property as well.

Let us consider another example that is characteristic of the literature on positional goods. Take a political party whose current party leader resigns. Ana and her fellow party member, Ben, are both in the running for this position, which only *one* of them can get, per definition (i.e. the leadership position is fixed-sum). Let us assume that Ana is more qualified than Ben, as she has more relevant educational and work experience and is expected to become more popular amongst voters. She becomes the new party leader, gaining the status and power that go along with the position.

Here, we see again a mismatch between the economic and philosophical understanding on positional goods. In “the case of leadership jobs” (1976 [1999]: 41–51), Hirsch called leadership positions ‘positional jobs’ because these are *fixed-sum*. The job itself, then, is a positional good in the economic understanding of that term. The educational credentials needed to obtain that job are not ‘positional goods’ in this understanding as they are not fixed-sum and do not strictly depend on one’s position in the income distribution.

Hirsch linked the increase of people with educational degrees specifically to *income*. According to him, “an increase in effective demand for superior jobs can be expected to accompany the growth of the material sector, because with material wants better satisfied, people are readier to devote more resources to improving their work situation” (Hirsch 1976 [1999]: 48). However, this has an impact on the positional economy, as an increase of resources (most notably, *income*) devoted to formal education also reduces the efficacy of a given ‘unit’ of education in securing access to higher-level jobs (Hirsch 1976 [1999] 48–49). Put differently, individuals need to spend increasing amounts of income acquiring educational credentials in order to improve their chances of obtaining (fixed-sum) positional goods—here, leadership positions. An individual’s education therefore incurs costs on society as a whole, since increasing amounts of money have to be spent on education for one’s relative position to remain the same. Positional competition then creates social waste: one’s chances of getting the leadership position have not altered, while expenditures have gone up.

Philosophers took over this economic understanding of positional competition and its recognition of the social waste it involves. However, they broadened their understanding of positionality: contrary to the economic sense, they *do* regard educational credentials as positional. For the philosophical understanding, the value of the good (say, my master’s degree) depends on how many others have one as well. It is my position in the *distribution of this good* (beyond income) that matters, as it will determine which job opportunities are open to me. If Ben improved his qualities and credentials in relation to Ana’s, then hers would be devalued, giving her a disadvantage in the competition for the party leadership position (and the power and status that go along with it).

Philosophers had good reasons to take over and adapt the notion of positional goods and positional competitions. Doing so enabled them to focus on and get a better grip on the important and concrete real-life struggles and competitions that people face on a daily basis in education, the labour market, politics and leisure. However, this conceptual shift led to theorists using the same notions—‘positional goods’ and ‘positional competition’—in different and sometimes incompatible ways. Importantly, while broadening the meaning of positional

competition, the philosophical understanding kept what is definitional to the economic understanding of positional competition—namely, its Zero-Sum Claim.⁷

For example, Brighthouse and Swift contended that when we consider positional goods, “[t]he competitive features of the goods in question give them a *zero-sum aspect*; the mere fact that some have more worsens the absolute position of those who have less” (Brighthouse and Swift 2006: 474, emphasis added).

Similarly, Fishkin (2014) stated that competitions in which there is a fixed number of places that cannot be obtained by all at the same time are entirely zero-sum. One person having more advantages and opportunities not only improves their standing in the order of rank but also *reduces* the advantages and opportunities available to others. “If there can only be so many winners, then one had better get a leg up on one’s competitors” (Fishkin 2014: 138).

Kolodny (2010), in turn, said that “we are locked into a zero-sum Competition for Social Advantage, where our gain must be another’s loss and another’s gain must be our loss. We are thus inclined to be uncharitable, deceitful, and so on” (172). We can acquire social advantage by entering zero-sum competitions for social goods such as property, political power, social class and fame, which are also positional (171). While Kolodny explicitly referred to Hirsch in a footnote, it is clear that he used the notions of ‘positional goods’ and ‘positional competition’ in line with the broader philosophical understanding.

Wilkinson and Pickett (2018) focused on a specific form of positional competition, namely status competition. Status competition “is a zero-sum game: we cannot all improve our status relative to each other. If some gain, others lose” (Wilkinson and Pickett 2018: 149).

These quotes suggest that authors employing the philosophical understanding think that positional competition is necessarily zero-sum rather than contingently so. While different authors use the same terms, suggesting that they are talking about the same concepts, this is not actually the case. As I will argue, the Zero-Sum Claim does not apply to the philosophical understanding of positional competition. While the debates revolving around the philosophical sense of positional goods/competition should continue, the Zero-Sum Claim should be dropped from them altogether.

3. Problems with the Zero-Sum Claim

The economic and philosophical understandings both describe (competitions for) positional goods as zero-sum. However, when we look at what ‘zero-sum’ means and see how demanding this term is, we gather that it does not apply to most of the cases the philosophical understanding wishes to describe and analyse.

As noted in section 2, goods are zero-sum if their total amount is fixed (Grolleau et al. 2014: 464). A zero-sum *game*, then, refers to a situation in which the payoffs add up to zero; what one party gains is also exactly what the other loses (Kelly 2003: 6, 77).

However, ‘zero-sum’ does not fit with the broader philosophical understanding of positional competition. The key here is that it is about *the good’s value to their possessors*.⁸ As such, it is not purely about the fixed-sum good anymore (as was the case for the economic

⁷ Note that philosophers *broadened* the economic understanding, so they *haven’t completely replaced* it with their own alternative. This means that philosophers can still make the Zero-Sum Claim, as long as they use it in the economic sense, referring to fixed-sum goods where access depends on relative income. However, this paper mostly focusses on those goods that are positional in the philosophical sense but fall outside of the scope of the economic understanding.

⁸ Recall Brighthouse and Swift’s definition: “Positional goods ... are goods the absolute value of which, *to their possessors*, depends on those possessors’ place in the distribution of the good—on their relative standing with respect to the good in question” (2006: 474, emphasis added).

understanding) but about its value to individuals. While it is very useful to have this broader understanding of positionality, the focus on value implies that the payoffs of the sum will hardly ever add up to *exactly* zero, as the meaning of ‘zero-sum’ demands.

One plausible way of understanding ‘value’ is in a *subjective* sense, where individual desires and attitudes are at play. However, even if measurement and interpersonal comparison problems could be solved, positional competition is hardly ever zero-sum in this interpretation of positional value (section 3.1.). ‘Value’ can also be understood in an *objective* sense—for example, when situating the value of a good in the access it offers to actual rewards and resources. But here too, I will argue, the outcome of the sum will hardly ever be zero (section 3.2.). The upshot of this section is that when talking about positional value and positional competition in its philosophical understanding, the Zero-Sum Claim should be avoided. What *A* wins in terms of the value of positional goods will seldom or never equal what *B* loses in value.

3.1. Subjective Understandings of Value

In this first understanding, value is subjective in nature and refers to the many ways in which one can value or care about something, ranging from admiration to indifference to contempt. Valuing something involves a complex combination of deliberation, standards for perception, emotions, desires and behaviours that express and thereby communicate a good’s importance to a person (Anderson 1993: 11).

For the Zero-Sum Claim to hold, positional competition should create gains and losses in subjective value for different parties that, when aggregated, amount to precisely zero. These wins and losses can be expressed in several ways, such as *lost and added value* or *utility gains and losses*. However, even if we were able to determine how the different parties value the good in question and (interpersonally) compare the extent to which they value the good (i.e. its utility), it is unlikely that the net outcome of positional competition will be *exactly* zero (which is what the Zero-Sum Claim entails).

Take value first. A crucial question for the philosophical understanding is how much positional (and non-positional) value a good gains or loses to its possessor when someone else (also) obtains this good. This question is irrelevant for the economic understanding because it only focuses narrowly on the fixed-sum good at hand, such as a beachfront property: if *A* gets it (+1), this goes at the cost of *B* (−1), balancing each other out (0). But when we focus on value, which is crucial to the philosophical understanding, things become more complicated, and such a strictly equal outcome becomes much less likely.

Recall Marx’s quote in the epigraph. Imagine that your neighbours want to show off their wealth and decide to expand their house, so that it becomes bigger than yours. It is hard to see why the payoffs of this positional competition amount to exactly zero, since the valuing preferences of you and your neighbours likely differ. Maybe your neighbour is much more concerned with status and showing off with his large house than you are, which means that you are hardly bothered by your neighbour’s quest for competitive advantage.⁹ Moreover, goods with positional value, such as houses, educational background, income and leadership positions, are often closely related to each other. How can we strictly separate them from each other and from the good’s non-positional value? And how does the value of these and other interconnected goods possessed by different people change over time and under changing circumstances?

⁹ Note that the fact that positional arms races might elicit *jealousy* amongst the ‘losers’ with respect to the ‘winners’ is not the point here. Instead, it is about how different parties value *the good* in question and how those valuations compare with one another. These differing valuing attitudes towards a good are unlikely to amount to exactly zero.

A second way of thinking about gains and losses would be to calculate utility.¹⁰ Economists and utilitarians have plenty of experience in measuring utility, which can also be applied to positional competitions. While I will not engage in existing debates¹¹ on measurement problems regarding utility gains and losses (or other ways of measuring benefits and costs), those adhering to the philosophical understanding of positional competition must accept that solving such problems will not be enough. The demanding zero-sum terminology requires that the sum of the gains and losses of *one* good with positional value amounts to *exactly* zero. This implies that the winners, the losers and perhaps others have the same preferences to exactly the same degree. However, this is false in most cases, as I will illustrate using a familiar example.

For the net outcome to be exactly zero in the case where Ana obtains the position at the cost of Ben, whose relative position now decreases accordingly, Ana and Ben should both prefer that position to exactly the same degree. But this is likely to be false in many instances—for example, when being the leader is Ana’s only lifelong dream job, whereas Ben does not feel as passionate about it. As Ken Binmore noted, the intensity in preferences (or valuing attitudes, if you prefer to talk about ‘values’ instead of ‘preferences’ or ‘utility’) often differs from person to person (Binmore 2009). Winning the competition for leadership results in a greater utility gain for Ana than for Ben; the value of the good to the individual can vary from person to person. The net outcome is not zero because the good’s positional value is higher for one person than for the other.

The difficulty in interpersonally comparing value or utility is worrying for those using the philosophical understanding of positionality and who still want to make the Zero-Sum Claim, as the claim substantially limits the (amount of) cases for which it holds. Even when focusing on how much utility the competing parties derive from *only* the *positional value* of a *single* good, the net outcome can only ever be exactly zero in an extremely limited set of cases. In section 4, I investigate whether this set of cases is empty or not. But first, I argue that the Zero-Sum Claim does not hold in the objective understanding of positional value, either.

3.2. Objective Understandings of Value

In the second understanding of (positional) value, “relativities matter not just subjectively but objectively” (Goodin 1990: 20). The claim that a good’s positional value ‘to their possessors’ decreases can also mean that the good *actually* becomes worth less—i.e. it becomes less useful or worthwhile—regardless of one’s subjective attitudes and desires. In this interpretation, people are arguably *objectively* better off with more goods with positional value and *objectively* worse off with fewer of them.¹²

The goods with positional value that philosophers like to focus on, such as income and credentials, are often instrumental in obtaining other rewards and resources, such as food, clothing (Harel Ben Shahar 2018: 105–106; Goodin 1990: 22–24), social inclusion (Brighouse and Swift 2006: 481), social standing, self-respect (Harel Ben Shahar 2018: 107), job security, status and power. Since access to such rewards and resources does not depend on the subjective attitudes one might have towards them, this access (as provided by positional goods such as income and credentials) has objective value to whomever possesses it.

On this objective understanding of value, for the Zero-Sum Claim to hold, the advantage of an individual *A*—provided that *A* wins the positional competition—should be equal in size to the corresponding disadvantage of another individual *B* who loses the positional competition.

¹⁰ For present purposes, the exact definition of utility is irrelevant.

¹¹ See, for example, Barrett (2019), Binmore (2009), van der Deijl (2018), Greaves and Lederman (2018), Harsanyi (1995), Hausman (1995) and Moscati (2018).

¹² I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting to incorporate a non-subjective understanding of a good’s positional value.

In short, the net outcome of aggregating (dis)advantages should equal zero. However, this, again, is false in most cases.

Recall the example of the positional competition for the biggest house. If you are not concerned with the social status and prestige that a large house confers, you may decide not to participate in the positional rat race for ever-bigger houses. However, such valuing attitudes (as discussed in section 3.1.) are arguably irrelevant here. In its objective understanding, a good's positional value to its possessors resides in the fact that those possessing the good (such as a big house and its accompanying status and prestige) affect access to important resources and rewards for those who have less of that good. After all, the positional rat race drives up housing prices in the entire neighbourhood and makes it impossible for the less well-off to buy a house in that area. Those who lack important resources are thereby more likely to be excluded; they have to move to a more affordable neighbourhood.

This housing example shows that even when adopting a non-subjective understanding of positionality, the Zero-Sum Claim does not hold. The larger the inequality in goods with positional value, the greater the negative impact on the worst off, as they are deprived of vital goods (an important one being social inclusion). Minor gains in social status and prestige for the better off (for example, by means of a bigger house) can have a disproportionately large impact on the worse off. In these cases, the gains and losses do not amount to zero.

Let us consider another example: Ana and Ben's competition for party leadership. Again, Ben might not care about the leadership position, whereas Ana does care. But such subjective attitudes (as discussed in section 3.1.) are arguably irrelevant when it comes to the power that comes with the position, which is part of what is valuable about the job. When Ana wins the positional competition and becomes the leader of the party, she will objectively have more power (and hence Ben less power, relatively speaking), regardless of their subjective attitudes. Or think of the positional value of educational degrees (i.e. the opportunities they create on the labour market for anyone holding them). These opportunities and the access they provide to certain kinds of jobs are facts of the matter and do not depend on the possessors' subjective attitudes. In other words, even if the holder does not care for their degree, they will still have more opportunities in the labour market, and conversely, people without such degrees will not have those opportunities.¹³

The Zero-Sum Claim does not hold in this example either. To illustrate, Ana getting the leadership position in the political party implies that Ben does not get it—that is, her higher position in the political hierarchy comes at the expense of Ben not advancing. In one sense, Ben's position has not changed, and he continues to do the same job as before. Yet, in another, relative-to-Ana-sense, Ben is now 'lower'. However, note that the relative position change has not come at any material cost to Ben in this second interpretation: Ana's gains in power and status are not supplied by Ben's material resources. Therefore, it is unclear whether Ben's position decreased by exactly the same amount as Ana's increase; hence, the net outcome might

¹³ For some goods with positional value, the size of inequality matters. Harel Ben Shahar called them *cardinal* positional goods. "The larger the inequality, the bigger the impact on the objective well-being of the worst off, because the size of inequality affects one's access to" resources and rewards (2018: 105–106). For example, the type and size of housing one's money can buy depends on how much others in a housing market are willing to spend on a similar good. For other goods, however, the size of the inequality is not relevant, but merely one's position in the ranking. Harel Ben Shahar called these *ordinal* positional goods, for which "the harm to the worse off is vested entirely in the ranking. In these cases, being overtaken by someone (with regard to the amount or quality of the positional good) constitutes the full damage to the worst off. It does not make any further (positional) difference whether the other has a lot more or just slightly more" (2018: 106). For example, it does not matter whether Ben's qualifications are slightly worse or a lot worse than Ana's in the competition for the leadership position; the fact that Ana came first and Ben second is all there is to know in deciding which of the two gets the job. Either way, the outcome of the payoffs of the positional competition is unlikely to be exactly zero.

be higher or lower than zero. Again, the Zero-Sum Claim does not hold in an objective understanding of a good's positional value to its possessor, either.

4. The Upsides and Downsides of Abstraction

As far as the philosophical understanding of positional competition is concerned, one can only defend the Zero-Sum Claim by holding on to an overly abstract picture of positionality. This picture might look as follows.

It is not only the leadership position (or any other scarce good) that is being distributed; instead, it is the corresponding *status* (and *power*, for that matter) that necessarily results in a net outcome of zero. Even if the total amount of goods with positional value increases (e.g. more different leadership positions and big houses will become available), the total amount of status cannot increase and thus cannot be positive-sum. The total amount of status can be imagined as a pie. One person obtaining a positional-status good (such as a leadership position or a bigger house) increases the size of their slice of this fixed-sum 'status pie'. This implies that an equal 'slice' is being taken away from someone else, which results in an outcome of zero. Ben *not* getting the leadership position implies him losing exactly the same 'amount' of status that Ana gains, with a net outcome of zero, so the argument goes. Every member of the political party has larger or smaller amounts of the fixed-size status pie, and by obtaining or not obtaining certain goods with positional value (e.g. a leadership position), the shares of corresponding status among the candidates change accordingly. The same goes for power: if someone climbs up the political ranks and thus gains power, this necessarily means that someone else's power is decreased accordingly.

This seems like an attractive way of saving the Zero-Sum Claim and making it fit with the philosophical understanding of positional competition. The Zero-Sum Claim then only seems to hold when it restricts itself to what I call 'pure positionality'. Examples of 'purely positional goods' are status, power and prestige *qua* status power and prestige, detached from any specific good. We should eliminate most parties and only focus on the people *directly* competing with each other (Ana and Ben in our political party example, or in the case of the house owners, only the people from the neighbourhood). Moreover, we should assume away the non-positional aspects¹⁴ and merely focus on the positional ones, as both parties value the positional aspect in exactly the same way. Besides, we should disregard the *actual* impact of having more or less of a good with positional value on the possessor's access to other resources and rewards. What we are left with is *purely* the status, prestige and power that the promotion bestows upon Ana and the person with the biggest house in comparison to their direct competitors. Ana obtaining a bigger piece of the 'status pie' implies Ben losing an equal but negative amount of this pie. Whatever the further consequences for others, or even for Ana and Ben, this very specific aspect of the competition is zero-sum. Therefore, it seems that we can understand positional competition if we only consider pure positionality—that is, status, power and prestige.

However, a notion of a zero-sum game that only holds in cases of pure positionality (status, power and prestige *qua* status, power and prestige) is too idealised and abstract. You cannot possess 'pure' status; it seems that it is always attached to some good—that is, something that can be shown to others and compared with others'. You can rise in status because of a certain house, job or car, but you cannot *have* the status *only*. In the actual world, we are interested in these positional competitions because of the concrete things they are

¹⁴ Some examples include the fact that Ana has an actual political and societal impact, regardless of how many others have impact as well, or the fact that a house is also a domicile where people can feel safe and at home.

attached to, such as making decisions in parliament, firing people and having people take you seriously. Consequently, while in the philosophical understanding, status, power and prestige can be conceived of as *purely* positional and can arguably be understood as zero-sum, it is (at best) difficult to tell when we have isolated these aspects and successfully abstracted away from non-positional aspects. In most real-life cases, positional value does not exist independently of the specific goods that generate and signal it. Since status, power and prestige are always attached to other goods, the problems raised earlier in section 3 come into force, leaving out many things that might matter in understanding and describing positional competition. As soon as we are thinking of real-life competitions instead of purely hypothetical, abstract ones, we can no longer speak of positional competitions as zero-sum games in any meaningful way. Or, at least in the context of social and political philosophy, conceptualising positional competition as zero-sum games removes the notion so far away from actual positional competitions that it becomes unhelpful and no longer insightful. Such an abstraction is a theoretical possibility, albeit one that no longer succeeds in adequately representing actual positional competitions.

One might respond that abstractions are widely used within philosophy and for good reasons. Clean hypotheticals arguably help to focus on relevant aspects of the issue at hand and ignore irrelevant ones.¹⁵ However, I believe that such abstractions are only useful if they indeed (i) succeed in capturing and isolating the characteristic feature of a phenomenon and (ii) thereby deepen our understanding of the concrete instances they should be representing (see Lawson 1997: chap. 16; Weisberg 2007). The abstract notion of positional competitions as zero-sum games meets neither of these criteria.

The reason that the Zero-Sum Claim fails to (ii) deepen our understanding of concrete positional competitions that actually impact our daily lives has to do with (i) its inability to capture and isolate positional competition's characteristic feature. What authors in philosophical debates, such as Brighouse and Swift (2006), Kolodny (2010), Fishkin (2014), and Wilkinson and Pickett (2018), are actually after is describing cases where “one player can only be made better off by making the other player worse off” (Ross 2019). In other words, they are identifying cases where there is no room for Pareto improvements. However, labelling these cases in ‘zero-sum’ terms is often incorrect. As we have seen in section 3, a gain in positional value of +5 for person *A* implies that another person *B* is now worse off, although this loss does not have to be a loss of –5. Person *A*'s gain of +5 can also mean a loss of, say, –1 or –10 for *B*. The Zero-Sum Claim thus fails to capture and isolate the characteristic feature of positional competition that the philosophical understanding aims to analyse—namely, the fact that no one can be made better off without making someone else worse off.

As the next section will show, my proposed alternative—understanding positional competition as a *win-lose game*—avoids these limitations and succeeds in accurately and insightfully representing a much larger set of actual positional competitions, which the philosophical understanding manages to include.

5. Implications of Adopting the Win-Lose Claim

In light of the above, I propose abandoning the term ‘zero-sum game’ and replacing it with ‘win-lose game’ when speaking of positional competition in its philosophical understanding. In other words, we should drop the Zero-Sum Claim and replace it with the Win-Lose Claim.

The Win-Lose Claim. Positional competition is necessarily a win-lose game.

¹⁵ I thank an anonymous reviewer for this insightful comment.

As a win-lose game, positional competition means that one party's gain still necessarily goes at the cost of another party, whose payoffs are now lower, while the net aggregate outcome can be higher or lower than zero.

This avoids the ambiguous and inaccurate terminology that pervades discussions on positionality. To illustrate, consider the following quote:

[P]ermitting inequalities in education or political influence or legal representation does not merely benefit some while leaving others as well off as they were before. The competitive features of [positional goods] give them a zero-sum aspect; the mere fact that some have more worsens the absolute position of those who have less. (Brighouse and Swift 2006: 482)

Given how loosely the term 'zero-sum' is used when employing the philosophical understanding, it would be much clearer to adopt the accurate term 'win-lose' instead. While this allows one to recognise that someone winning *necessarily* goes at the cost of someone else losing, it also better describes what is going on in the complex relations at play in the real-life instances that adherents of the philosophical understanding aim to analyse.

The conceptual shift from a zero-sum to a win-lose approach has normative implications as well. Whether or not the outcome of a positional competition is morally desirable does not depend only on one's preferred theory of ethics or distributive justice but also on our understanding of positionality. To illustrate just one of those implications, take any positional competition for good *X* with positional value. Assume, for the sake of argument, that the better off in society win even more of good *X* at the cost of the already and now increasingly worse off.¹⁶ Let me now, by means of this example, sketch how the Win-Lose Claim generates different outcomes than the Zero-Sum Claim when relying on different distributive principles (utilitarianism, prioritarianism and the leximin version of prioritarianism) to assess the fairness and desirability of (the effects of) positional competitions.

First, let us focus on utilitarianism. According to utilitarians, actions are morally right if and only if they maximise the good—that is, if they create an as big as possible total amount of good. It takes each person's interest as having equal moral weight: benefits to one party matter just as much as similar benefits to another party (Sinnott-Armstrong 2019). When we understand positional competitions as zero-sum games, then utilitarians would be indifferent towards them by definition, as the benefits to the winners and the costs to the losers would always balance each other out, with a net outcome of exactly zero. The only aspect that matters for utilitarianism (i.e. the overall utility) would not increase or decrease but remain exactly the same.

Utilitarians could, of course, object to positional competitions that generate perverse incentives and social waste. However, to do so, they should adopt a broad perspective and the Win-Lose Claim instead of the Zero-Sum Claim. The former holds on to what characterises positional competition—winners' gains necessarily come at the cost of losers' losses—but still allows for the possibility that the overall outcome (all things taken into account) is negative due to, for example, the social waste involved. The Win-Lose Claim also allows for the conceptual possibility that a given positional competition is desirable overall—namely, when

¹⁶ While I merely assume for the sake of argument that the already better off continue to win positional competitions, there are numerous real-life examples in which this actually happens. Think of parents with a relatively high position on the socio-economic ladder who pass on advantages to their children, which, in turn, increases their chances of ending up relatively high on the ladder as well. Or think of competitions for status. Those are easier to win if one already has a sought-after, high-paying job.

the benefits (to the better off, in our example) are bigger than the losses (to the worse off, in our example).

Second, take prioritarianism, according to which “for any person, the lower her lifetime well-being score ... the more morally valuable it would be to secure an incremental gain of well-being for her (or to avoid a small loss)” (Arneson 2013). In determining the overall desirability, prioritarians give extra moral weight (to well-being gains that go) to the worse off.

In their 2006 paper, Brighouse and Swift made a prioritarian case for an equal distribution of goods with positional value, even if that would entail levelling down (i.e. taking positional goods from the better off or best off without redistributing those goods to the worse off or worst off):

[L]evelling down with respect to positional goods benefits absolutely, in some respect, those who would otherwise have less than others. It may thus be amenable to justification by appeal to prioritarian ... considerations. Where positional goods (or, to speak more precisely, goods with positional aspects) are concerned, one does not need to be an egalitarian to have reason to level down. (Brighouse and Swift 2006: 472)

If one interprets positional competition as a zero-sum game, it indeed makes sense to level down on prioritarian grounds. Assume that a person already better off wins a positional competition (gaining +5 in well-being), which means that a worse off person is now even worse off (losing -5 in well-being). When priority is given to these ‘losers’, their losses always morally outweigh the gains to the winners, which implies that any positional competition is inevitably morally problematic (i.e. regardless of how much more moral weight you give to the worse off).

Dropping the Zero-Sum Claim in favour of the Win-Lose Claim makes this story more nuanced because it all turns on how much moral weight we give to the gains and losses of the different parties in the distribution of good X. Imagine that a better-off person wins (more of) good X, gaining, say, +5 (in well-being) at the cost of a worse off person, who loses -1, or -10 for that matter. Whether positional competition for good X is morally desirable or problematic now hinges on how those benefits and losses compare to each other and how much more moral weight is given to the losses of the worse off. Assume a prioritarian gives double the moral weight to the worse off: while they would oppose any positional competition on the basis of the Zero-Sum Claim, they would *not* oppose a positional competition that generates +5 (in well-being) for the better off and -1 for the worse off.¹⁷

Third, consider the leximin version of prioritarianism, which gives *absolute* priority to the worst off in society, then to the position just above the worst off and so on (Fleurbaey 2021).¹⁸ If one takes the leximin criterion as the guiding principle of justice, then any positional competition that generates further costs to the already worst off will be impermissible, regardless of how those costs compare to the benefits of others. In our case, where the already well off are expected to win the positional competition, *any* gain going to them inevitably implies a loss for the worst off. Regardless of how small this loss is, it is not morally justified

¹⁷ In real-life cases, this is further complicated by the fact that many goods have both positional and non-positional value so that the positive impact of the good’s non-positional value on the worse off can outweigh the costs of a positional rat race. Take education. Apart from the competitive advantage a degree generates, individuals also enjoy non-positional benefits that come along with being an educated person, such as knowledge and skills that are enjoyed for their own sake. In addition, positional competitions for highly complex jobs, such as surgeons, might generate positive externalities, as it enables others to enjoy better health care as well. Of course, it all depends on concrete circumstances which benefits and costs (or gains and losses) any given positional competition generates for its winners, its losers and society at large.

¹⁸ The worst off are defined as “those with the least share of the primary goods of income and wealth, and powers and positions of office” (Freeman 2019), pre-eminently goods with positional value.

on leximin grounds. To make this claim, which is the core of the leximin principle, leximin theorists need only the Win-Lose Claim and not the more stringent Zero-Sum Claim. The Win-Lose Claim then enables them to object to *any* kind of positional competition instead of having to restrict themselves to rare cases in which losses and gains are exactly equal in size.

While this brief discussion of positional competition through the utilitarian, prioritarian and leximin lenses only scratches the surface, it suffices to show the (politically) philosophical relevance and implications of replacing the Zero-Sum Claim with the Win-Lose Claim. Importantly, the Win-Lose Claim provides conceptual room for more interesting and nuanced discussions about the desirability and (in)justice involved in the positional competitions that affect our everyday lives.

6. Conclusion

Different authors in the literature on positional competition have made the Zero-Sum Claim. However, the terms ‘positional goods’ and ‘positional competitions’ are often used ambiguously, creating conceptual confusion between what I have called the ‘economic’ and the ‘philosophical’ understanding of positionality.

The original economic understanding of positionality correctly calls positional goods ‘zero-sum goods’ because they are fixed in supply. Access to such goods is determined by one’s position in the distribution of *income*. One person’s rise in this distribution (of, say, +1) produces the externality of another person going down by the same amount (−1), resulting in an outcome of exactly zero.

However, the philosophical understanding in the debate shifted the focus to the *value of a good to the individual*, which changes depending on one’s position in the distribution of that good. These two understandings of positionality are obviously not the same. While there were good reasons for this shift in understanding, it should have implied dropping the Zero-Sum Claim, which is still made in the philosophical literature but no longer holds.

Replacing the Zero-Sum Claim with my Win-Lose Claim provides a more accurate picture of what positional competition, in its philosophical understanding, actually is and why it is worrying: one person winning necessarily entails another person losing, making Pareto improvements impossible. My approach thus clears up conceptual confusion and more accurately captures the real-life positional competitions that philosophers aim to analyse. In addition, it has the potential to inform and shed new light on debates about the desirability of (actual) positional competitions. All in all, I am convinced that replacing the term ‘zero-sum’ with ‘win-lose’ will have a positive net outcome.

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