

## **Responsibility and Comparative Pride – a Critical Discussion of Morgan-Knapp**

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### **Abstract**

Taking pride in being better than others in some regard is not uncommon. In a recent paper, Christopher Morgan-Knapp (2019) argues that such pride is rationally misguided: it ‘presents things as being some way they are not’ (Morgan-Knapp 2019: 317). I argue that Morgan-Knapp’s arguments do not succeed in showing that comparative pride is theoretically mistaken.

**Keywords:** pride; responsibility; achievement

## Responsibility and Comparative Pride – a Critical Discussion of Morgan-Knapp

Comparative pride is the pride one can take in how one compares to others. In a recent paper, Christopher Morgan-Knapp (2019) argues that though such pride is commonly culturally affirmed, it is not only morally or prudentially questionable, but that it should be rejected on wholly theoretical grounds: it ‘presents things as being some way they are not’ (Morgan-Knapp 2019: 317). He thus argues that comparative pride is never warranted. I will argue that Morgan-Knapp’s arguments for the claim that comparative pride is unwarranted are unsuccessful. And to the extent that they are successful, they do not concern the theoretical adequacy of comparative pride, but rather its moral fittingness. Either way, then, Morgan-Knapp fails to identify any theoretical shortcoming in comparative pride.

In this discussion, I will first outline his main argument Morgan-Knapp offers against comparative pride and argue that it should be rejected for two reasons: first, it misidentifies the object of comparative pride, and second, it hinges on considerations that undermine the warrant for noncomparative pride as well as comparative pride. I will then discuss a second argument suggested by his paper which might be thought to save his conclusion. I argue that this argument fails to offer purely theoretical grounds to reject comparative pride. The argument may be a good one, but it would depend on substantive ethical assumptions rather than the purely theoretical considerations that Morgan-Knapp claims. I thus conclude that his arguments do not succeed in showing that comparative pride is theoretically mistaken.

### §1 Morgan-Knapp’s Core Argument

Comparative pride, Morgan-Knapp suggests, is generally considered legitimate within both contemporary culture and contemporary philosophy. However, he believes that this status is undeserved: he claims that comparative pride depends on a ‘theoretical mistake’, and is *always* ‘irrational’ (Morgan-Knapp 2019: 317). There are two claims that might be at stake here: firstly, that comparative pride is such that it *necessarily* fails to be rational or warranted (because, for instance, it involves logical inconsistency); or, secondly, he might argue for the weaker claim that no instance of comparative pride in fact happens to meet the conditions to be rational or warranted. Though the secondary argument I will discuss in §3 seems to make the former, stronger claim, his core argument seems to be best understood as directed at the second, weaker claim.<sup>1</sup> In section §2 I shall argue that this argument fails.

Morgan-Knapp’s core argument against comparative pride proceeds as follows:

- 1) We can rationally take achievement-pride only in things we’re sufficiently responsible for.
- 2) We do not have any significant degree of responsibility for comparative achievements.
- 3) Therefore, taking achievement-pride in comparative achievements is a mistake.

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<sup>1</sup> That this is his claim is suggested by that fact that he considers in turn the factors that could make a difference in a comparative achievement, and suggests that none of them could ground achievement pride.

Achievement-pride, as Morgan-Knapp understands it, is something that can be expressed by the locution ‘proud *of myself* for’. One is proud of oneself for those things that are to one’s credit, that reflect well on one as an agent: one might be proud of oneself for keeping a difficult resolution, cooking a delicious dinner, or being a good friend when it was hard to do so.<sup>2</sup> This contrasts with identity-pride, whereby one can be proud of having a certain feature, where the feature is out of one’s hands: for example, think of gay pride, or the idea of national pride.<sup>3</sup> Identity pride is often expressed as pride in ‘being’ a certain way. To be proud *of oneself*, Morgan-Knapp states, is to assess oneself as an agent. And assessment of oneself as an agent involves assessing oneself with reference to things one is responsible for. Given this conception of achievement-pride, (1) is meant to be something like a conceptual truth. From now on, by ‘pride’ I will be specifically referring to achievement-pride.<sup>4</sup>

The crux of Morgan-Knapp’s argument, then, is in his justification of claim (2). Having suggested that achievement-pride can only be taken in something that the agent is sufficiently responsible for, he argues that comparative achievements will never meet this threshold of responsibility. This is because whether one wins a comparative victory depends significantly on what others achieve. Others’ achievements are not normally things that we are responsible for, but (1) stated that we can take achievement-pride only in things we’re sufficiently responsible for. So, since other’s achievements are not significantly up to us, he concludes that we are mistaken in taking pride in states of affairs involving relative achievements.<sup>5</sup>

Morgan-Knapp discusses the warrant for comparative pride with regard to Claire Tuggle’s achievement in setting the US record for the 200-metre freestyle swim for girls of age ten and under. He allows that Claire’s impressive swiftness was an achievement, but rejects the idea that her setting the record (the comparative achievement of swimming 200 metres *faster* than any other American girl aged ten or less) constitutes any further achievement beyond swimming swiftly. The only component of the comparative victory that goes beyond the absolute achievement, he claims, is constituted by others’ achievements (i.e. by how fast Claire’s competitors swam). He therefore concludes that Claire is not sufficiently responsible for the comparative victory to take pride in it:

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<sup>2</sup> It is plausibly conceptually true of achievements that they involve *tasks* that are *difficult*. See, for example, Gwen Bradford (2015).

<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Fischer (2017) makes much of cases of identity pride in his argument against the thought that pride *per se* requires moral responsibility for the object of pride. However, his argument is consistent with Morgan-Knapp’s claims about achievement pride, since Morgan-Knapp explicitly understands achievement-pride as being merely one kind of pride.

<sup>4</sup> Morgan-Knapp focuses on *achievement* pride, but says nothing about the possibility of comparative *identity* pride. Since he regards identity-pride as warranted for at least some things that are outside of one’s control, it is possible that even if his argument were successful, some instances of comparative pride could be defended as instances of identity pride.

<sup>5</sup> Morgan-Knapp does allow that there will be no clear hard and fast boundary between things that we are sufficiently responsible for and those that we are not: ‘there is apt to be a good deal of vagueness regarding how much responsibility for an attribute will be sufficient to make it something we can be proud of ourselves for being or doing’ (Morgan-Knapp 2019: 320). However, he claims that there is nonetheless an important distinction here.

[A]ssuming things are not strange, Claire was not responsible for the specific things that made her performance not only fast, but record-setting. In this case, if Claire were to be proud of herself for setting a record in addition to the pride she takes in swimming fast, that extra, comparative pride would be based on something that she is not responsible for. Her comparative achievement-pride would thus be misleading; it would falsely present her record-setting (as distinguished from her simply swimming fast) as something she is responsible for. (Morgan-Knapp 2019: 322)

In making this argument, Morgan-Knapp does not deny that there will be some reasons that Claire swam faster than any other child her age and thus that there will be some reasons explaining why she set the record. He allows, for instance, that Claire may have trained harder than the other competitors, had better training opportunities than them, had physical advantages over them, or that perhaps luck was simply on her side. But he suggests that none of these reasons for the comparative victory render her sufficiently responsible for it to make comparative pride appropriate. In fact, Morgan-Knapp suggests that *no* reason that would explain why Claire swam faster than any other swimmer in her category could make her achievement any more impressive or worthy. He argues that any possible reason for her comparative success would be something that she was not responsible for, since it would have to explain others' relative slowness as much as her own speed. And Claire (barring unusual circumstances such as cheating) could not be responsible for others' relative slowness. No possible reason that would explain Claire's relative victory, he suggests, could thus render Claire sufficiently responsible for it to be a proper object of pride.

According to Morgan-Knapp, comparative pride thus 'presents things as being some way they are not' because it presents comparative achievements as things for which we are responsible, when we are not.

## §2 Two Reasons to Reject the Core Argument

I wish to raise two related reasons why this argument should be rejected. Firstly, the general thought that we are not (sufficiently) responsible for relative achievements depends on a mistaken conception of the object of comparative pride. Secondly, the argument, if successful, would undermine non-comparative as well as comparative pride. Since non-comparative pride is plausibly warranted in many cases, there is reason to doubt that the threshold for 'sufficient responsibility' to warrant pride is as high as Morgan-Knapp assumes. I will then suggest that the temptation to think we are not sufficiently responsible for comparative achievements depends on a general instability in our thinking about action, and that this undermines the significance of this line of thinking for comparative pride in particular.

Firstly, Morgan-Knapp suggests that in taking pride in swimming fastest, Claire would be taking pride in the conjunctive fact that she swam fast and all other swimmers in the relevant category swam at speeds that were lower than hers. This is why he claims that '[w]hat distinguishes the comparative achievement from the non-comparative achievement is what others have (or in this case, have not) done' (Morgan-Knapp 2019: 322). In other words, he suggests that to distinguish between the non-comparative achievement of swimming *fast* and the

comparative one of swimming *faster* than anyone else, we simply add in others' achievements. And he suggests that doing so does not alter our conception of the non-comparative achievement. But this way of thinking about it is misleading. For Claire might take comparative pride not simply in the overall state of affairs in which she has swum at a certain speed and others have swum at a lower speed.<sup>6</sup> Rather, her comparative pride might be in a relational property of her own achievement. That is, her swim might itself have the property of being faster than others' swimming. The addition of contextual factors such as others' swimming times to our overall picture might therefore add something to our conception of Claire's swim itself: we can then discern the relational properties that her swim itself has. And these relational properties seem like prime candidates for being the objects of comparative pride.

When we think of being the fastest swim as a relational property of *Claire's* swim, it no longer seems so odd to think that she could be significantly responsible for it. Morgan-Knapp seems right to say that we think of achievements as things over which we have a significant degree of control. He thus suggests that being proud of oneself for having been the recipient of a windfall inheritance from a relative one never knew, for example, would be mistaken. But one significant difference between such good fortune and Claire's relative victory is that being the fastest swimmer in the relevant category is something one could set for oneself as an end, whereas being the recipient of an unexpected fortune is not. That is, being the fastest swimmer is something one could actively seek, an end in accordance with which one could organise one's actions. For example, in seeking to be the fastest swimmer, Claire might monitor other competitors' performances to ensure that her own is up to scratch. She might continue training until she is the fastest, and push herself until she has achieved this.<sup>7</sup> It would seem odd if despite having sufficient control over the realisation of something to set it as an end, one nonetheless had insufficient responsibility for its realisation to ground pride. There is therefore good reason to doubt Morgan-Knapp's contention that we are not to any significant degree responsible for comparative achievements.<sup>8</sup>

A second reason to reject this argument is that the specific considerations Morgan-Knapp invokes to suggest that we're not sufficiently responsible for comparative achievements to take pride in them also undermine the possibility of warranted pride in non-comparative achievements. Morgan-Knapp suggests that calling to mind the reasons why Claire beat other people undermines our willingness to think of her comparative success as an achievement on her part. After all, Claire was not responsible for her physical advantages, training opportunities, or luck. According to his argument, the causal role such factors play in Claire's comparative victory makes it seem merely lucky that Claire was the fastest swimmer, and thus undermine our

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<sup>6</sup> Morgan-Knapp states that comparative pride 'represents its basis—one's superiority to others—as valuable independent of the value of one's performance considered on its own' (Morgan-Knapp 2019: 326). But of course, one need not think that superiority is *independently* valuable in order to think that it adds to the value of an achievement. (Being novel might add to the value of an artwork *iff* it's novel in way that adds to the aesthetic value of the work, for example).

<sup>7</sup> Notably, in these cases her actions might well be different from those she would pursue were her end simply the end of swimming as fast as she could. And even if she did the same things (e.g. extra training), they would be differently organised, or taken for different reasons.

<sup>8</sup> This initial consideration does not vindicate all comparative pride, since in many instances comparative victories are not set as ends in this way. Nonetheless, it gives reason to reject Morgan-Knapp's claim that comparative pride is *never* rational.

willingness to think that Claire was sufficiently responsible for the achievement to warrant pride.<sup>9</sup> But the same factors that led to her comparative success also seem to be those which are responsible for her non-comparative success. The non-comparative achievement of swimming swiftly was also the result of some combination of physical advantages, good training opportunities, effort, and luck. In fact, it seems that any possible reason for Claire's swimming fast could also be a reason that Claire swam faster than others.<sup>10</sup> If Morgan-Knapp's argument against comparative pride were successful, it would thus undermine the warrant for non-comparative pride as well. Given the plausibility of the thought that pride in non-comparative achievements can be warranted (a thought Morgan-Knapp explicitly accepts), there is reason to think that his argument is mistaken in its identification of the threshold for sufficient responsibility to warrant pride.

When we consider the various reasons why Claire might have set the swimming record, it seems plausible that we do feel tempted to think she is not sufficiently responsible for her achievements to make pride appropriate. But this temptation stems from an instability in our thinking about our actions in general. That is, in general when we consider our actions or achievements with reference to their purely causal histories, we seem to find no space for the agent to step in and influence them. Thinking about our actions in this way thus seems to undermine thinking about them as things for which we are responsible at all. But unless one is a hard determinist – a position Morgan-Knapp claims to set aside – this causal history must somehow coexist with agential responsibility.<sup>11</sup> That is, insofar as one is willing to think that Claire could be responsible for her achievements at all, detailing their causal history will not rule out agential responsibility for them. And Morgan-Knapp gives us no reason to think that if we set hard determinism aside Claire will nonetheless be insufficiently responsible for her comparative achievements for pride to be appropriate.

Morgan-Knapp's core argument thus fails to give reason to accept the claim that no instance of comparative pride in fact happens to meet the conditions to be rational. It thus fails to give us reason to think that in taking pride in comparative achievements we are making a theoretical mistake. There is, however, another line of argument suggested by later comments in his paper, to which I will now turn.

### **§3 A Further Argument**

After setting forward his core argument, Morgan-Knapp briefly seems to suggest a second line of argument. In this line of argument, he makes a stronger claim than was implied by

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<sup>9</sup> Morgan-Knapp does identify effort as another factor that might explain Claire's relative victory. But he suggests that outperforming those who have not tried hard is not a valuable achievement. If others are simply not trying to win, then gaining a victory over them seems like insufficiently taxing to count as an achievement. But if the fact that others have put in less effort than oneself undermines the relative victory being an achievement, it seems that putting in effort should also undermine one's own success being an achievement.

<sup>10</sup> That is, for any achievement the effort and skills that are necessary in order to achieve the relevant end will be determined by environmental factors. In this respect, the fact that swimming fastest depends on others swimming more slowly (something that is not up to me) is not different from the fact that jumping a high fence depends on it being a certain height (something that is not up to me).

<sup>11</sup> The classic discussion of this is Strawson (1962)

the core argument. Whereas he there suggested that no comparative achievement is actually such that the agent is sufficiently responsible for it to ground pride, he here suggests that ‘there is a kind of incoherence in taking pride in being the best’ (Morgan-Knapp 2019; 327). That is, he suggests that there is a kind of logical incoherence implicit in the very idea of comparative pride. I shall suggest that there need be no such incoherence in taking pride in being the best. The problem with such an agent would not be that they were incoherent, but that they were valuing the wrong kinds of thing: the mistake they would be making would not be wholly theoretical, but importantly ethical.

Morgan-Knapp suggests that in taking pride in comparative achievements, one must value the situation where others fail but one succeeds. As such, he claims that one must value others’ failure, since it is a necessary component of one’s comparative success. But he suggests that this is incoherent, since in order to value one’s own success one must value achievement itself in the given domain.<sup>12</sup> He writes:

Such pride involves both a positive valuation of success in that domain—for otherwise it would not be the source of one’s pride—and a positive valuation of failure in that domain—for one’s superiority is conceptually dependent on others’ inferiority. (Morgan-Knapp 2019: 327)

Morgan-Knapp seems here to be thinking that in order to value comparative success, one must value non-comparative success in a domain. But in order to take comparative pride one must value others’ failure in that domain, for the two are conceptually interconnected.<sup>13</sup> He argues that valuing others’ failure in a given domain whilst valuing non-comparative success in that domain would be somehow incoherent. He thus suggests that there is a kind of incoherence implicit in the idea of comparative pride.

However, there is no entailment between feeling comparative pride and valuing others’ failure, at least if such failure is non-comparative. I earlier noted that the person who values comparative success does not merely value other people doing badly. Rather, they value standing in a certain relation to others (something along the lines of ‘better than them in respect x’). As such, the person who takes comparative pride in an achievement need not value others’ failures *per se*. Rather, in valuing doing better than others, they value others doing worse than them. That is, they value other’s comparative failures, but not necessarily their non-comparative ones. This seems significantly different from valuing their failure itself, and it fails to yield an inconsistency: it seems coherent to value others doing worse than oneself whilst also valuing success in a domain.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> This seems parallel to attempts to show that egoism is self-contradictory, the reasons we have to value (or avoid) things for ourselves are also reasons to value (or avoid) them for others. Nagel (1970), for instance, makes an argument in this vein.

<sup>13</sup> In this respect, valuing comparative success seems importantly dissimilar to valuing goods that are limited. One can plausibly value eating the last slice of cake simply *because* cake is tasty, not because doing so entails that others cannot eat it. The connection to others’ failure to enjoy eating cake is merely contingent. But the very notion of a comparative achievement is necessarily interconnected with others’ failure.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, given that easy victories can seem somewhat hollow, the person who values comparative success might prefer others to be non-comparatively successful.

Specifically, only given certain ethical assumptions does valuing others' success in a domain seem inconsistent with valuing others doing worse than oneself. For example, if we include the assumption the we value other people, or value their doing well, then there would be an incoherence in also thinking success in a given domain was valuable and yet that others doing worse than oneself was valuable. But these are substantive ethical assumptions. It is hard to see how one could reach something approaching incoherence without some such assumption. The ethical assumptions that need to be invoked to yield an inconsistency are, however, highly plausible. This second argument thus fails as a purely theoretical argument, but as an ethical argument it is promising.<sup>15</sup>

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