Kinds of Competition: Zeal, Envy, and Discord in Economic Life

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Abstract. Discussions surrounding the ethics of market competition—particularly those involving representations of Christian morality—are often confused due to a lack of rigorous distinction between different kinds of competition. This paper makes use of Aquinas' notions of zeal, envy, and discord to identify several kinds of competition that are compatible with the love of neighbor and to distinguish at least one kind that is incompatible. Invidious competition, which pursues the destruction, diversion, or inhibition of another party's excellence—whether as a means or an end—is always unethical. Indirect, zealous, and justly discordant competition are, by contrast, not only ethical forms of competition, but generally tend towards the benefit of the participants and the larger community.

Keywords: economics, competition, market, Aquinas, ethics, Christianity

1. Introduction

For an ethical discussion to be useful, it is generally best to have a clear definition of the subject matter—but in the case of "competition," a clear and ethically useful definition isn't always easily reached.[1] The absence of a morally rigorous definition of competition produces remarkably diverse conclusions about its ethical character—a diversity which is perhaps most notable in those seeking to evaluate how "competition" fares from a Christian moral perspective. Thus Knight, in the early twentieth century, declares confidently—and quite prematurely—that "Christianity has been interpreted in so many conflicting ways that one must hesitate to bring it into a scientific discussion; yet even this wide range of uncertainty will not admit competitive values into Christian thought" (1935, 72). To Knight, Christianity excludes competition. Kathryn Tanner argues for her part that the Christian notion of the "economy of grace," that is, of free giving, must motivate Christians to imbue economic life with the "principle of non-competitiveness" (2005, 105ff). To Tanner, Christianity seeks to

[1] Christoph Lütge attempts a definition of "competition," but the result is rather unsatisfactory. His first definition is flagrantly circular: "Under competition I understand a situation in which several actors are engaged in a competitive endeavor" (2019, 6). He then goes on to describe competition as a kind of a rule-governed struggle—but does so without explaining what he means by "struggle."

sow non-competitiveness where there is competition. Then Anthony M. Annett, who presents himself as a spokesman for modern Catholic social teaching, allows that the church "does not reject market competition outright; it recognizes that cooperation is just as (if not more) important…" (2022, 76). To Annet, competition is not excluded by Christianity, [2] only Christianity values cooperation too (or more). And Jeffrey E. Haymond, writing about the role of the competitive market in God's providential ordering through common grace, says that "market competition is in essence cooperation with others" (2026, 85). To Haymond, Christianity should embrace competition and cooperation as the same thing.

Doubtless these wildly conflicting claims spring to some degree from different conceptions of what constitutes "genuine" Christianity; I think it likely, though, that the confusion is more directly traceable to equivocal uses of the word "competition."[3] In what follows I consequently present multiple kinds of competition and identify which, if any, are incompatible with a basic Christian morality.

Beginning with a clarification of the basic parameters, principles, and definitions involved in this inquiry, I move on to consider a competitive model without a competitive mindset, for which perfect competition provides a paradigmatic case. Following this, I organize the subsequent sections around Aquinas' categories of zeal, envy, and discord. These, I believe, will be helpful for the characterization and moral evaluation of certain kinds of competitive decision-making that surface with some frequency in economic life, with other illustrative examples drawn from sports and other competitive games, since these are perhaps the most familiar aspects of competition in contemporary culture. I conclude that apart from the case of envy, all of the other forms of competition are potentially congruous with a basic Christian ethics.

2. Parameters, Principles, and Definitions

It will be important in what follows to keep in mind that the limited goal of this paper is to identify ethical principles that should govern particular competitive choices. This paper, in other words, is not concerned primarily with structures, but with the specific actions of

[2] As far as the Catholic Church is concerned, to say it doesn't "condemn competition outright" is a rather gross understatement. In point of fact, the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* waxes rather eloquent on the social benefits of the competitive market: "*A truly competitive market is an effective instrument for attaining important objectives of justice:* moderating the excessive profits of individual businesses, responding to consumers' demands, bringing about a more efficient use and conservation of resources, rewarding entrepreneurship and innovation, making information available so that it is really possible to compare and purchase products in an atmosphere of healthy competition" (2005, #347/150-151, italics in original). Note, however, the qualifiers "true" and "healthy."

[3] Although the above excerpts pertain more directly to market competition, the same lack of consensus shows itself in other contexts. For instance, in the fourth chapter of his *Well Played* (2015), Shafer discusses a similar disagreement between Shirl Hoffman and Drew Hyland over whether sports competition is compatible with the Christian ethos.

individual agents. We are focused on the ethical analysis of micro-, not macroeconomics. Our aim is decidedly not to suggest which behaviors should be encouraged or deterred by formal or informal structures.[4] Nor are we considering which economic arrangements facilitate or discourage ethical decision-making. To the extent that we bring up a given economic scenario, it is not to morally evaluate the scenario itself, but rather to evaluate whether a given behavior, motivation, or strategy within that scenario is morally acceptable or not. So much for the parameters of our subject matter.[5]

When it comes to a question of principles, the "Christian" morality we will take as our operative norm may be quite minimal. We may in fact frame our basic principle in terms of the second formulation of Kant's categorical imperative: *one is never morally permitted to treat another human being as a mere means to some other end*. John Paul II describes this principle as a "primordial moral requirement" (1993, #48), and so I think we may assume, for the purposes of our discussion, this principle to be both presupposed by the Christian command to "love your neighbor as yourself," and also (in principle, at least) accessible to reason unaided by revelation. As seen above, dissensions over this issue are particularly vivid in the context of Christian ethics, but our evaluation is one ultimately grounded in natural law.

To make a (hopefully unnecessary) clarification: our foundational moral principle does not forbid us from engaging with other people out of a desire to achieve some goal of our own—thus the importance of specifying that we should not treat another person as a "*mere* means." But it does imply we ought not knowingly attack the other person's good for the sake of some other end. That would count as treating the other as a mere means, as someone whose own end, whose own fulfillment, may be thwarted so that ours can be realized. If we disregard the other's good to the point that we are willing to attack it for some other reason, we have failed to live up to the moral minimum in our dealings with another human being.

Nor, I will presume, is a person absolved of this minimalist moral commitment in cases where deliberately doing harm to another individual can somehow bring about a supposedly greater social good overall. Heath (2014, 98ff), largely through a disastrous confusion of indirect, zealous, and envious competition, is willing to maintain that competitors who deliberately seek to cause each other harm (albeit in rule-governed ways) are entitled to do so for the sake of the "greater good" of market efficiency or sports excellence. This is simply a form of collectivism,[6] and if it differs in pragmatic outcome from fascist or socialist forms of

[4] Consequently, when I use the term "market" or "marketplace," I am referring simply to the realm of economic life without further specification. I do not mean to invoke more subtle distinctions such as that between market principle and marketplace. See Kaplan (1984, 25-33).
[5] Hirschfeld (2018, especially chapters 5 and 7) applies Aquinas' thought primarily to clarify the proper ends of wealth, and how those ends should temper our pursuit of it. My interest here is more to employ Aquinas' categories in assessing the different strategies we use in order to acquire wealth.
[6] Lütge (28-9) likewise claims that the "ethical qualities of competition lie in its *systemic* results," and suggests that individual morality is less relevant in a globalized context.

collectivism, it must be subject to the same moral censure as every system which attacks the good of an individual for the sake of the net benefit to society. As far as Christianity goes, this kind of collectivist consequentialism found its definitive expression when Caiaphas justified his plan to have the innocent Christ murdered in order to benefit "the people" as a whole (See John 11:50). There is, quite simply, no room for attacking the individual's good on behalf of the group, whether in Christian morality or in any ethical system that puts a premium on respect for personal dignity.

The purpose of this paper is not to interpret Thomistic doctrine, so much as to apply certain categories found in Aquinas to an ethical evaluation of competition. Having said this, it might be worthwhile to briefly consider how the categorical imperative fits with the notions of justice and grace so central to both Christian and Thomistic ethics. Of course, an exhaustive evaluation of the Thomistic notions of justice and grace is not possible within the confines of this brief paper, but we might at least note the way in which Aquinas' notion of commutative justice harmonizes with the basic impulse of the prohibition against treating another as a mere means. Commutative justice is the virtue that governs our interactions with other individuals (see *Summa theologica,* II-II, 61, 1)—that is, individuals whom we regard as properly 'other': i.e., strangers, not as extensions of ourselves.[7] As Aquinas says in one place, "a man's work is said to be just when it is related to some other by way of some kind of equality, for instance the payment of the wage due for a service rendered" (*Summa theologica*, II-II, 57, 1). In justice between individuals (which, recall, is the special focus of this paper), there must be a kind of equality which, as I see it, respects the equal value of the agents as they deal with each other. This equality between transacting parties is, as I understand the passage, emblematic of the broader framework which perceives dealings between two persons as 'just' when these persons relate to each other according to a fundamental attitude of equality—which of course precludes either person making the end of one wholly subordinate to the end of another. In this way, preserving a basic equality between the ends of two individuals is the concern of both commutative justice and the categorical imperative.

I have spoken repeatedly now of a "minimalist" moral commitment. Let me unpack what I mean by that qualifier, in terms of grace. As Aquinas notes, all talk of justice and the related notion of equity presuppose a more fundamental ground of divine generosity.[8] The gift of existence, the gift of redemption, the gift of sanctification and the offered gift of eternal life are supposed to contextualize Christian dealings with one's neighbor, and the Gospel is strewn with examples where Christ exhorts his disciples to go beyond the category of equitable exchange and to be generous in giving and forgiving. God's generosity requires that

[7] See also Pieper (1966, 104-3) for a discussion on the "Limits of Justice."

[8] See, for instance, *Summa theologica*, I, 21, 4: "For this reason does God out of the abundance of His goodness bestow upon creatures what is due to them more bountifully than is proportionate to their deserts: since less would suffice for preserving the order of justice than what the divine goodness confers; because between creatures and God's goodness there can be no proportion."

we be generous to others: "every man is a debtor to his neighbor, on God's account, from whom we have received all good things" (*Summa contra gentiles* I, ch. 28/29, #4). When I say that the morality assumed here is "minimalist," therefore, my claim is not that one fulfills the demands of the Christian life by maintaining this minimum, but rather that one necessarily fails in the demands of the Christian life by falling below it. The way in which the Christian notion of divine grace might or should transform economic life is certainly an important topic,[9] but far beyond the much more modest scope of this essay.[10]

Finally, before looking at various species of competition, we should provide a working definition of competition as such. We may be guided in our formulation by the moral dilemma at issue: can I ethically strive for success when my success will hinder or preclude the success of another? Intuitively, it seems difficult to love my neighbor as myself, to treat his end as equal to my own, when I am knowingly working for my good at his expense. Thus the need to evaluate cases where it seems as though that is precisely what I am doing. I propose, then, that "different parties pursuing mutually excluding ends" can serve as our working definition of "competition." Although other general definitions are certainly plausible, this definition reaches the essence of the moral problem on which we hope to shed some light.

3. "Perfect Competition" and Competition without a Competitive Mindset

In defining competition as "the pursuit by different parties of mutually excluding ends," we immediately come up against what appears to be a crucial counter-example, since it is not clear that the notion of "perfect competition," as employed by economists, would satisfy this definition—and it might seem strange to define "competition" so as to exclude "perfect competition" from qualifying as competition at all. Now, when economists speak of perfect competition, they're referring to a state of affairs in which many completely informed, rational, and self-interested people are trying to buy a widely available good from many completely informed, rational, and self-interested people who are trying to sell it. The scale of the good and the large number of buyers and sellers results in a situation where any given buyer or seller entering or exiting the market (which, as the case generally presupposes, they are free to do at any time) has no appreciable impact on prices or availability. Consequently, the various agents are not getting in one another's way, and—if this is perfect competition—it seems not to belong to the essence of competition, in that it involves different parties pursuing mutually excluding ends.

[9] For one reflection on how Thomistic principles can guide an approach to economic life that harmonizes the demands of human nature and divine grace, see Franks (2009, especially 170-81).

[10] Nonetheless, although grace and generosity are indispensable to a Christian vision of anything human, it remains that in economic matters, much of Aquinas' focus centers on justice. As Januard (2025, 40) notes, when discussing Aquinas' notion of "just price," for instance, "Aquinas does not base his analysis on a price of charity, a price of efficiency, or some other qualifier, but on a 'just' price, thus a price that conforms to the virtue of justice."

Moreover, the equilibrium which perfect competition brings to the market is considered to be Pareto-optimal, such that the situation of no single individual could be improved without worsening that of another. For instance, at the equilibrium, all sellers sell their product to all buyers at the established market price, which means that if A sold his good to B above market price, B would be getting a worse deal than he's getting in the perfectly competitive market. However, since *ex hypothesi* B is like everyone else (perfectly informed, rational, and self-interested), A has no interest in raising his prices, because he knows that to do so would drive B and any other potential customers to other vendors. So, under the equilibrium brought about by perfect competition, a) no one could improve his situation without worsening someone else's; and b) no one has any motivation to try to improve his situation, since he knows any such attempt will backfire. In other words, perfect competition not only renders the various agents indifferent to the efforts of other buyers or sellers (since the market is large enough that the presence or absence of this particular buyer or seller makes no practical difference), but in fact restrains them practically and morally from any attempts to do anything that would make it more difficult for a transacting party to achieve his goal. So again, how can this situation be plausibly described as "the pursuit by different parties of mutually excluding ends"?

There are several points to be made here. First, respecting the notion of perfect competition as such, we may concede that any scenario wholly free from mutually frustrating activity would *de facto* escape my suggested definition of "competition." Nonetheless, note that "perfect competition" is a term of art, not designed to capture the intrinsic nature of competition so much as to denote an optimal arrangement between buyers and sellers. Precisely because the scenario in question includes buyers and sellers, we may continue to call them "competitors" even though the basis for which they were originally described as such no longer obtains under these ideal conditions. However, it may be that this concession grants too much, since even in a perfectly competitive market it remains true that it is the presence of buyers and sellers that determines the prices. A drop added to the ocean makes no discernable difference, but the ocean is nonetheless composed of individual drops; even if the presence or absence of individual buyers and sellers does not noticeably affect the market for a given commodity, the prices would in fact be different—and perhaps more satisfactory for an individual buyer or seller—if it were not for a large portion of those seeking to supply or consume this particular good. In this case, even under ideal conditions, an agent might be able to achieve his ends more efficiently if other people in the market weren't trying to achieve theirs. So it may well be that, in this respect, my definition would still apply to perfect competition.

A second point: "perfect competition" describes an ideal state that certain markets approach to a greater or lesser degree, but never more than asymptotically.[11] In the real world,

[11] In other words, "a theoretical benchmark concept in economics" (Pleatsikas 2018, 1272).

the knowledge and rationality (to say nothing of self-interest) characterizing individual agents is always non-absolute; extra-market factors are a source of continual destabilization, and many markets are not large enough to meet the conditions of atomicity, in any case. Consequently, the scenarios listed below (by which I will be illustrating the different forms of competition) deviate largely from conditions of perfect competition but are all either real or plausible cases calling for ethical analysis. Since cases like these all fall under the description of "different parties pursuing mutually excluding ends," our definition will prove useful, if not for the moral evaluation of ideal scenarios, at least for the moral evaluation of real ones.

Finally, and most importantly, our consideration of perfect competition shows that it is quite possible to have many buyers and sellers for a given product without falling into a competitive mindset, i.e., a psychological state in which I am consciously pursuing a gain that necessarily entails your loss. The possibility of avoiding such a mindset obtains in the real world as well as in the realm of theory. To the extent that market competition approaches perfect competition, agents may not even consider their competitors, which entails, obviously, that no one is trying to do something that harms someone else. Sowell (2015, 75) gives the example of Catholics and Protestants directing their resources towards the construction of a new church—even though their mutual pursuit of the same kinds of materials may affect availability and/or prices, the communities are unlikely to think of themselves as competing. Their focus on the pursued good means that any rivalry is an unconscious and unintended side-effect. There is no question of one group trying to hurt another, and so this kind of competition, as such, does not run afoul of our minimally ethical attitude of benevolence.

Moreover, to the extent that the scenario in question differs from perfect competition, one may be aware of one's competitors, factor them into one's choices—and even then not directly attempt to prevent them from reaching their goal. Suppose Bruce Springsteen tickets go on sale early tomorrow, and the demand is rumored to be enormous. I may set my alarm clock for four a.m., hoping to get an advanced place in the ticket line before the concert sells out. Now on reflection I may realize I am competing with many other thousands of fans: if I get a ticket, it means someone else will not. But the non-possession of other fans is not willed by me as a *means*, since I'm not tearing the ticket out of anyone's hand, or trying to prevent people from getting to the booth. And the non-possession of tickets by other fans is not willed by me as an end, since if everyone who wants a ticket ends up getting one, so much the better. And if I do not wish to frustrate another's goal, either as a means or as an end, that frustration must be an unintended side-effect. So, too, from the supply-side: if I have a widget to sell, I may look to see what other widget-vendors are charging for their widgets, but only so I can determine which prices will motivate buyers. Again, I do not need to hope the other widget vendors sell less as a result of my entering the field, even if that should be the probable result.

To summarize: to the extent that an agent's focus is simply on attracting business, i.e., finding someone willing to engage in mutually beneficial trade, to that extent buyers are looking to *cooperate* with sellers and vice-versa.[12] The fact that there are many buyers or sellers, and that in some cases the presence of buyer A will make the task of other buyers more difficult (and likewise with sellers) does not undermine the essentially cooperative nature of such an enterprise. To that extent, it is true to say that the core of market "competition" really is market "cooperation."

Things become more complicated, ethically, when competitors engage in a contest wherein my own success is strictly and consciously measured against that of someone else: i.e., where I cannot "win" if the other "wins." In this case, my intentional focus is directly targeted on my competitor, and (at least on some level) my explicit hope is to achieve my goal more successfully than my competitor achieves his. It is in these scenarios that I believe Aquinas' distinction between zeal, envy, and discord can be most morally illuminating.

4. Zealous Competition: Pursuing a Standard of Excellence

We may begin with zealous competition—and specifically with the way in which Aquinas employs Aristotle's distinction between envy and zeal, identifying the latter as a mark of virtue. Zeal, like envy, recognizes that someone else has an excellence I do not. Unlike envy, though, zeal responds by prompting the imitation of that excellence (*De Malo*, 10, 1, ad. 11).

Competitive games regularly exhibit this zealous competitive structure, wherein the excellence of one player prompts a desire for greater excellence in the other. In such cases, "Comparison helps us to dig deeper so we can get more out of ourselves than we otherwise could if we were alone" (Little 2024, 82). This prompting takes place in two ways: firstly by posing challenges, and secondly by standard-setting.

An illustration: I enjoy chess, and part of the way to get better is to solve tactics puzzles, which are enjoyable in themselves and can be found online or in books. It is more enjoyable, however, to have a friend set me puzzle-challenges while I am simultaneously setting puzzle-challenges for him. This is what happens while a regular game of chess is in progress. Moreover, when either of us wins, the one who has been checkmated can benefit from the winner's superior play, and thus has a reasonable standard or excellence to pursue the next time.[13]

This kind of mutual encouragement through competitive zeal happens in other important contexts. For instance, if I need to work through the implications of my own

[12] Bruni and Sugden (2013, esp. 153ff) argue (correctly, I think), that this mutual benefit is precisely the end of the market itself, and that the worthiness of this end, combined with the character traits its pursuit tends to foster, make it a virtuous enterprise. For his part, Santori (2021, esp. 44-47 and 126-136) has shown how Aquinas' thought anticipates and historically informs this understanding of the market and of civil society itself.

[13] Shionoya (1995, 8) distinguishes between "record-type games" and "struggle-type games." I think the distinction useful, but more for identifying different *aspects* of games than for identifying differences in the games themselves.

opinions, I may ask a friend to play devil's advocate, i.e., to help me understand my own thoughts better by posing challenges. Far from trying to attack my good, my friend's activity is designed to encourage the increasing clarification of my position.

Business excellence naturally provides these benefits to competitors in the same field. We speak of an excellent company as one providing the industry standard, a model and aspiration for others in the same line of work. Moreover, an excellent business poses the challenge to other businesses as to how to emulate excellent business practices in new and creative ways, according to their own capacities and contexts.

Here too, neither the excellent business nor the aspiring business necessarily has any hostility or ill-will towards the other. Neither needs to hope or act for diminution of the other's excellence or success. The ideal of being willing to share "best practices" with other firms testifies to this attitude of a zealous pursuit of excellence which seeks to meet and surpass, but not diminish, the standard set by another.

Two qualifiers are important here. First, competition for excellence can easily become damaging to competitors—a "race to the bottom" as Heath (2014, 96ff) puts it—as standards of excellence in one area become so high that other more fundamental goods are neglected or sacrificed to reach them. But this can be avoided as long as different kinds of excellence are prioritized appropriately. It is more important to be a good father than a good chess player, and so if one needs to neglect excellence in the one area so as to develop in the other, then chess competition should take a backseat. So too with business excellence: the zealous competition that drives it is good, but if other more important excellences require more investment in a given situation, then one should ease up on peak levels of competitive zeal at work. Not everyone needs to compete maximally in every context.[14]

The second qualifier, and one which will be significant moving forward, is that zealous competition thrives best between competitors of a certain parity.[15] By contrast, if that parity is lacking—if, say, a grandmaster chess player plays at full strength, and only against a novice just learning the game—neither party will likely be prompted to greater excellence. The grandmaster will not be challenged, his game will decline, and the novice will lose interest in playing when it is clear that the standard set by his opponent is utterly beyond his reach. Competition between poorly matched competitors normally undermines competition and the excellence that comes from it—an excellence that builds up not only the competitors themselves but society as a whole.

[14] Archer (2019, 144), for instance, imagines a case in which two brothers regularly run marathons together, but the one brother, without resentment, is happy to let the other brother win without trying to match the latter's excellence. This could be a perfectly reasonable response to another's superior excellence in a given situation.

[15] John Paul II (1991, #15) states that the good of the economy requires "a certain equality between the parties, such that one party would not be so powerful as practically to reduce the other to subservience."

5. Envious Competition: The Impulse to Destroy or Thwart Another's Good

As we have seen, insofar as zealous competition recognizes another's excellence, it seeks to emulate it. Envy is, by contrast, a displeasure at another's good which "moves a person to contrary activities that hinder another's good" (Aquinas, *De Malo*, 10, 1, ad. 7).[16] Zeal is constructive competition; envy is destructive competition; more precisely, it's competition that seeks to eliminate competition.

These different impulses appear to derive from fundamentally different modes of appraising excellence. Zealous competition sees excellence as objective and intrinsic: another's objective excellence provides a lure to pursue higher degrees of excellence for oneself. Envious competition sees excellence as subjective and superficially imposed from without. Intrinsic excellence is replaced by relative superiority and/or recognition. What matters is not the nature of my character or performance, but the perks of their standing relative to other agents.[17] So, for instance, the comedian Brandon Vestal relates that he once tried to calculate how many people would have to die before he became the best basketball player on earth. He didn't come up with an exact number, but he said it was "a lot." The same impulse was at work—concretely, not imaginatively, this time—when figure-skater Tonya Harding had her rival violently assaulted. Envy is something of a paradox in that an envious person longs to be the "best" without actually being any "better." Another person's death cannot improve my basketball game, and Nancy Kerrigan's injury did not contribute to Tonya Harding's figure-skating ability. But if the right persons are eliminated from the playing field, I will be named—applauded and rewarded with all acclaim and honor—as winner by default.

What if the other has a good of which they don't seem worthy? Is one allowed to lament or work against the other's possession of the good in that case? Aquinas answers that if the good in question is of genuine benefit to the other (and not, as sometimes happens, a good in the abstract which in practice does the other harm, and especially moral or spiritual harm), one should not be sorry on account of the unworthy person's good fortune.[18] Kristján Kristjánsson (2002, 163) takes issue with Aquinas here: there is something improper, Kristjánsson says, about unworthy persons receiving disproportionate benefits in life, and so it is virtuous to be averse to such eventualities. But if, as Aquinas holds, delight is the proper response to good while sorrow is the proper response to evil,[19] then how can sorrow at a good—whether it be another's or one's own—fail to constitute a disordered response? If a particular good the other receives is disproportionate to that person's overall flourishing,

[16] Aquinas' presentation of zeal and envy closely mirrors what Niels van de Ven *et al.* (2009) describe as benign envy and malicious envy.

[17] Aquinas makes an analogous distinction between magnanimity and vanity: the former cares about intrinsic excellence (i.e., what is *worthy* of praise), while vanity just wants the praise. See *Summa theologica*, II-II, 129, 1, ad. 3; 132, 1, ad. 3; 2 ad. 1. See also Miravalle (2017, 170-3).

[18] *Summa theologica,* II-II, 36, 2.

[19] See, for instance, *Summa theologica*, I-II, 23.

then what might otherwise constitute a good would in this case constitute an evil, and we might legitimately sorrow, as just mentioned. But if the good is only disproportionate to a person's merits, and yet still contributes to that person's overall well-being (as happens in plenty of serendipitous cases), then to incline or act against that good is to attack human flourishing, which cannot be other than vicious.

Application to the market: there is nothing inherently unjust—or illegal[20]—about a company objectively being the biggest, the most lucrative, and the most efficient. There has to be a best, and sometimes the best is simply much better than everyone else—at least for a while[21] (in sports, the Chicago Bulls of the 1990s come to mind[22]).

This ethical problem emerges when one contender—perhaps the bigger one, with the resources to crush smaller parties—attempts to disable another contender. That kind of strategy involves a deliberate attempt to destroy or thwart another's good, which violates our minimal principle of morality relative to one's neighbor.

Here, I must be careful not to make specific, definite, and illustrative condemnations, which might prompt a debate over the individual case and so distract us from the general principle. Take, for instance, the notion of predatory pricing, which involves implementing pricing models that are unprofitable in the short run but are designed to put rivals with more shallow pockets out of business—after which, of course, the predator may safely raise prices without fear of competition. How often does this happen? Which companies have been guilty of it? I do not know. Some argue that the practice is purely hypothetical, with few if any concrete cases (See, for instance, Woods 2005, 176-82). Others argue that the practice has been continuous for the last century and into this one (e.g., Stoller 2019). Fortunately, we do not need to take a stand on a given case—we may confine ourselves to the hypothetical.

Thus, *if* one company sets its pricing-model with the deliberate goal of destroying another's business as a means of maximizing profits, that would be immoral. *If* executives and programmers at Microsoft really did openly make it their objective to destroy Lotus and Netscape, those objectives would be immoral.[23] If Lotus and Netscape were simply trying to achieve the goods and modes of excellence analogous to those pursued by Microsoft, then individuals at Microsoft had no legitimate justification for trying to thwart those goods and modes of excellence (whether they did or did not do so).

[20] Cf. the 2003 Supreme Court decision in *Verizon Communications Inc. v. Law Offices of Curtis V. Trinko, LLP.*

[21] I will consciously refrain from commenting on whether, when or how those in charge of the activity are permitted to change the rules in the hopes of granting relief from a certain dominance which has caused interest and creativity in the field to stagnate.

[22] The cover for the March 10, 1997 issue of *Sports Illustrated* issue actually asked, "Are the Bulls so Good They're Bad for the NBA?"

[23] Examples taken from Stoller (2019, 426 and 429).

Attacking another's good may therefore take both a positive or negative form, viz., deliberately depriving someone of a good already possessed, or deliberately thwarting their ability to acquire that good. Let us look at some more hypothetical examples of each:

One may deprive someone of a good when, for instance, one proactively attempts to attract the customers of another business away from them. If I am a recruiter for a small, traditional Catholic college, and I send targeted advertisements to students enrolled at another small, traditional Catholic college, on what basis can I justify trying to deprive my competitor of business? I will be hard-pressed to pretend that my competitor is not doing worthy work in giving students an education which is, in all essential points, of a piece with the education offered at my institution. Granted, my peer institutions and I will likely be trying to appeal to the same general pool of students. But if a student has expressed an intention to attend the competitor college, a college which will likely serve him roughly as well as my own, and I deliberately try to change that student's mind—well, I am like the man Aquinas discusses who steals a man's seeds out of his very field, and so unjustly deprives him not only of the seeds but of the harvest he was "on the way" to reaping (*Summa theologica,* II-II, 62, 4, obj. 1).

Conversely, one may thwart a competitor from achieving a good when, for instance, one tries actively to block a good product or service from entering the market in the first place. For instance, it is a very strange fact that Ferrero's Kinder Surprise chocolate egg, which has permeated the candy markets of much of the world, has been outlawed in the United States on safety grounds. The safety hazard of the egg and the toy inside appears minimal, both given its approval by so many other nations and given various other objects marketed to children in the US itself—objects whose hazard dwarfs that of the prize components inside the chocolate egg. It might be—again, I say *might* be—true that US candy lobbies played some role in preventing this delightful and delicious product from entry on the American scene. Were such the case, a good for Ferrero and a good for the consumer would have been thwarted, without contributing anything to the greater excellence of domestic chocolate.

Again, trying to find a particular case to single out for definite, non-hypothetical condemnation isn't necessary, especially since actual business advisors—such as competition specialist Michael Porter—explicitly recommend strategies geared not towards one's own excellence but towards the thwarting of others' success. In Porter's book on *Competitive Advantage* (1985, 488-94), these practices are euphemistically described as "raising structural barriers." Thus, companies with a current advantage are counseled to maintain that advantage by working to block the competitor's access to the consumer; to shut down the possibility of the competitor's exploring new technologies; to prevent the competitor's access to suppliers; to undermine those suppliers willing to work with the competitor; and, of course, to lobby the government to implement policies that hamper the competitor. As Arthur Applbaum comments:

> This is not a list of academic hypotheticals. Many of these tactics are easily recognizable as common business practices: laundry detergent and shampoo manufactures clog up supermarket aisles; copyrights and patents are purchased and shelved by film makers and computer manufacturers; airlines corner scarce landing gates; one auto manufacturer lobbies for a stricter bumper standard because it has a cost advantage to the bumper manufacturer. And then there is Microsoft (1999, 195).

No one really believes that destructive competition—competition seeking to self-aggrandize by diminishing others—is present in so many other areas of human life but remains miraculously absent from the market. It may be that free markets reduce this invidious tendency in human beings,[24] but the tendency remains, and to be forewarned against an immoral impulse is to be forearmed.

To some, it may appear too subtle, and ultimately irrelevant, to distinguish between indirect competition among rivals for scarce goods (our first category) and this condemned form of envious competition. If I end up with a good, and my neighbor does not, what difference do my motivations or tactics make to him?

Morally speaking, it makes all the difference—as much difference as it would make getting the gold medal by being the best skater compared to getting the gold medal by having a rival crippled before the championships, or even by raiding the true victor's house so as to steal the medal after the fact. The former method earns the reward through competitive excellence; the latter methods may yield undue benefits through competitive malice.

6. Competition and Discord

We have said that one must not directly and deliberately attack another's good in the name of competition. But it may be morally legitimate to challenge another's misdeed, whether as perpetrated against oneself or a third party.

Aquinas describes discord as a situation in which the peace of concord, i.e., the unified will of multiple parties, is broken. This is, in itself, a lamentable situation, since the good of charity and peace require that everyone be united and be "directed together to one thing, which is chiefly the Divine good, secondarily, the good of our neighbor." However, although often enough this rupture is the fault of both parties, "discord is sometimes the sin of one party only, for instance, when one wills a good which the other knowingly resists" (*Summa theologica,* II-II, 37, 1).

[24] As argued, to take one example, in Novak (1996, 90-2).

This internal state of discord may go on to take expression in both words (contentious speech) and actions (war, strife, sedition, and schism). Each of these is a misfortune, which implies wrongdoing on at least one side. Nonetheless, the party that struggles against error and injustice does not *de facto* fall into sin.

Thus, for instance, although it's wrong to be quarrelsome, or needlessly contentious in speech, if "contention denote a disavowal of what is false, with the proper measure of acrimony, it is praiseworthy" (*Summa theologica,* II-II, 38, 1). Ethical competition cannot take the form of attacking another's good, but it certainly can seek to demolish another's error or canard, as long as the limits of basic decency are not exceeded. Courtroom lawyers, public relations firms, and advertising executives are well within their moral rights in vigorously working against the false campaigns of their competitors.

Likewise with strife in action: it's immoral to launch into a private war, but if a man's "sole intention be to withstand the injury done to him, and he defend himself with due moderation, it is no sin, and one cannot say properly that there is strife on his part" (*Summa theologica,* II-II, 41, 1). A marvelous illustration of this legitimate self-defense in business occurred in the late 2000s, when the Wal-Mart in Lawrence, Kansas ran a local ad about its superiority to Hy-Vee, a regional grocery chain. Hy-Vee responded with a good-humored ad encouraging people to come see why the world's largest retailer considered them worth singling out for attack.

Although perhaps not guilty of falsehood, Wal-Mart's approach in this exchange certainly seemed to fall on the side of envious, destructive competition. Not content to advertise their own offerings, they openly tried to divert customers away from Hy-Vee. The latter, admirably in my view, defended itself simply by calling attention to Wal-Mart's unsavory tactics, which it felicitously turned to its own advantage.

Defensive resistance need not be a moral option only in the case of aggression against oneself. You can carve your niche in the market by defending a third party from bad business practices. For instance, there is by now a cottage-industry of firms dedicated to helping people get out of their timeshare commitments with a minimum of cost and difficulty. Let's suppose for the sake of argument that many companies who sell timeshares are using deceptive and psychologically pressuring advertising methods to encourage people to make investments they will likely regret later. In other words, the timeshare companies profit by encouraging poor choices on the part of consumers. If other companies recognize this phenomenon, and want to make it their business to work against it, by all means let them strive to liberate consumers from this unwanted burden. Let the anti-timeshare companies do battle against the timeshare companies, and may the former take comfort in the righteousness of their cause.

The militaristic imagery of the preceding sentence is deliberate. Heath, in his chapter on competition, notes the popularity of Sun-Tzu's *Art of War* among business hopefuls (2014, 114). The point of our discussion on competitive discord is that a just war in the marketplace, as on the battlefield, is always defensive, never aggressive. It is a war against falsehood and injustice, not against goodness.

7. Conclusion

We began this paper with Knight's declaration that Christian morality must be antithetically opposed to competition. This declaration betrays a basic ignorance of some of the core imagery in the Christian Bible, which not infrequently uses competitive metaphors to express certain fundamental Christian ideas. The Christian life is itself framed in competitive terms: Jacob contends with God all night, and wins; St. Paul competes well, he runs and finishes the race. Christ goes so far as to describe his very mission as a winner-take-all struggle against the devil in the pursuit of finite goods: Jesus is the stronger man who will defeat the strong-man and carry off all the latter's possessions (Genesis 32:22-32; 2 Timothy 4:7-8; Matthew 12:29). Hoffman (2010, 162) worries—and with good reason—about "cherry-picking" scriptural selections to artificially affirm a superficial and uncritical competitive Christian mindset, but while the Bible's competitive imagery needs to be interpreted within a broad perspective of reason and revelation, it cannot simply be ignored.

But more important than this imagery is the basic realization that competition doesn't necessarily run counter to love of neighbor, whether as proclaimed by Christianity or as recognized by the law written on the human heart. It is true that certain activities which we have labeled "competitive" involve different parties working to achieve incompatible ends—but the end I pursue, though it precludes the end my neighbor pursues, need not be directed to his harm. Thus, I may seek the same scarce good as my neighbor, and not set as my goal his loss as either a means or an end. My neighbor and I may both seek to set the standard of excellence at the same time, and although only one of us can set it (only one of us can be the best in a particular game or activity), setting that standard serves the other in providing him with a new aspirational goal. I may moreover work against a falsehood or an injustice my neighbor is perpetrating, and in so doing hope to advance his good by curbing the evil he is committing. What I may *not* do without violating a policy of benevolence towards my neighbor is attack his good, thwart his good, steal his good, or try to handicap his capacity for achieving a good.

Moreover, no one claims that even the legitimate forms of competition exhaust our moral obligations or comprehensively characterize the life of virtue.[25] Quite the contrary, those legitimate forms of competition are themselves particularly vulnerable to certain powerful temptations. Competition for scarce resources requires vigilance against habitual indifference towards the needs of others; competition for excellence in one area, as stated

[25] Thus, for instance, David Gauthier's provocatively titled paper, "No Need for Morality: The Case of the Competitive Market," explicitly acknowledges the need for moral principles of self-governance, even if society were capable of erecting perfectly competitive markets—which he admits it is not (1982, 42, 54).

earlier, requires a constant care not to neglect other, more important, forms of human excellence; and the competitive struggle against agents of falsity or aggression requires resisting the urge to take the fight beyond the parameters of civility or even decency. Finally, as noted earlier, we have not attempted to account for what is surely a Christian requirement—namely, the duty of generosity—and have limited ourselves instead with elucidating a particular minimum standard below which Christian morality does not permit one to fall.

We should also avoid any pretense that these principles are susceptible of clear application in every case. In plenty of situations, our enumerated forms of competition—indirect, zealous, envious, and discordant—will overlap and intertwine so as to make sharp separations largely unfeasible. Nonetheless, the distinctions we have presented here will at least help guard against wholesale and naïve moral generalizations about competition as such, in which case our discussion may be of some practical use to Christians and other people of goodwill trying to behave as they ought to—promoting, not detracting from the other's good—when planning or executing their agency in the marketplace.

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