

1. Two examples

To most minds, economic competition is an inherent feature of capitalism, and one whose unpleasant consequences, if any, are vastly offset by its positive effects in terms of allocative efficiency (for a recent statement, see Joseph Stiglitz, 1994) or in terms of innovative impulse (see Israel Kirzner, 1994). Therefore, competition as an economic motive is enjoying a privileged status, and recent competition policy orientations show that many governments aim at making competition as widespread as possible. In this paper, I would like to challenge this virtually unchallenged position, and I would like to do so at a very fundamental level. What started me wondering—and worrying—about competition as an economic motive were two examples of which we might easily encounter instances in our daily lives. The first example is very micro-economic, the second more macro-oriented. They both illustrate a fundamental trait of competitive behavior, namely the negation of the “other-ness” of other individuals, a trait which is intuitively well known but which I find it urgent to discuss and criticize anew from the standpoint of the philosophy of economics. I will show how crucial a role “consumerism,” or the reification of the consumer, plays in this fundamental trait of economic competition. Here are the two examples.

Example 1. You are working full time at a chemical firm, doing research for pharmaceutical applications. Your boss is quite satisfied with your work; you have reasonable success and some of your findings have already led to small innovations in some medications. You have a family, and your wife and yourself are raising three children. Although you are not reluctant to

work longer hours on some days when there are urgent deadlines to meet, you try to be home by 6.30 or 7 pm, and on week-ends you try not to take any work home in order to be as fully available as possible to your family, to go out with the children or to visit the grandparents. Lately the competition from the large German concerns has been growing, however, and your boss is just a bit more edgy than in the past. Suddenly, your long-time colleague quits her job because of an illness. She is replaced by a younger man, who is single and likes to spend most of his nights at the office working. He usually goes home at 2 or 3 am. He is also rather brilliant and, because he has so much time to work, quickly gathers an impressive output of results. After a few months, your boss calls you to his office and tells you that your research is now moving a bit too slowly, and that you will have to come in on Saturdays if you are to match your new colleague's performance. In the light of the tightening competition, he says, there isn't much choice. Since the newcomer and some others start coming in on Saturdays, and sometimes also on Sunday afternoons, you end up having to do it too. Your family life suffers a huge setback, and your relationship with your wife deteriorates. After two years, she asks for a divorce, and you fall into a depression.

Example 2. You are head of a small factory which employs fifteen workers for the production of XZY rubber tubes, a special kind of tube used for the fabrication of some specific ecological automobile motors, called "Eco-motors." You are currently the world's largest producer and your business is doing well. You pay your employees well, and there is little or no social unrest in the firm. Suddenly, the European Union passes a new regulation which imposes Eco-motors for the whole of the car production flowing into Europe. Very quickly, you are submerged by orders; in South-East Asia, several competing firms start mass production of XZY tubes with labor costs ten times lower than yours. Within months, your order book empties. You start by trying to face the competition and reducing your employees' wages. Reluctantly, they accept because they see it is in the firm's and their own interest. However, virtually all car builders now purchase their XZY tubes in Asia, and a year later you are near bankruptcy. After a few more weeks, you have no choice but to close down; you and your fifteen workers are suddenly without a job.

2. Three arguments, one justification

These two examples strike me as paradigmatic of the everyday drama caused by the very existence of economic competition, especially nowadays with so many markets extending across the whole planet.¹ A striking feature in both cases is that no one is, in any obvious sense, *responsible* for what happens to individuals and/or to firms. Everything is going well and, suddenly, “something” occurs which causes a breakdown. This “something” is clearly of a *systemic* nature; it is a kind of anonymous force which, through the occurrence of an exogenous event (a colleague’s illness together with increased pressure from competitors, or the creation of a new environmental regulation), suddenly rushes in and makes the whole—often carefully constructed—edifice topple over, whether at the individual or at the firm level. Something which was working well is suddenly, because of largely exogenous reasons, no longer working at all, through no clear desert on the part of the “victim.” In neither example is any particular laziness or incompetence involved.

One might argue that these are simply two obvious illustrations of the general principle that individual fates are bound together within the social system. After all, no man is an island and decisions made by others influence our daily lives in numerous ways, most of the time through no fault of our own. No one can be protected 100% against the negative externalities of other people’s decisions, and in any case providing such 100% protection by forbidding all decisions which harm anyone would very probably paralyze the whole economic process because it would lead to massive infringements upon the liberty of decision makers. Proponents of a utilitarian view of things may moreover argue that while there are indeed negative effects of economic competition, they are vastly counterbalanced by positive effects for the bulk of consumers through lower prices, improved quality, and so on. A few unfortunate cases, they argue, should not be a deterrent to improve overall welfare; they can be mended on an individual basis by reconversions, solidarity funds, and the like—as is in effect being done within our present-day social security systems. So competition, a bit like democracy, is considered to be the “least bad” system. (And in that sense

¹ The two examples make it clear that, in this whole article, I will be viewing competition as a process of effective dynamic interaction between individuals, rather than — as is often the case in standard economic theory — viewing competition as an abstract state of a given system (the “perfectly competitive” Arrow-Debreu economy).

it is probably no casualty that political democracy coupled with a competitive market economy is the socio-economic ideal currently skyrocketing as the undisputed point of reference.)

The argument is powerful and widespread, and no serious analyst of economic competition can afford to overlook it. Let us probe its content a bit. It has an immediate ring of conservatism: individual fates are tied together within the social system, and this *supposedly implies* an acceptance, by all individuals, of the competitive principle. The system as it is somehow demands an unconditional acceptance, and does so in much the same way as the climate or some other natural being demands acceptance. Such a presentation of current capitalism as the virtually *only* way of tying individual fates together is, of course, valid only if current capitalism can be shown to be, in a way, a reflection of “natural” or even “ontological” imperatives; in other words, the defendents of the conservative argument are, whether they acknowledge it or not, referring back to an idea of “things as they are,” and they are claiming that current capitalism, with the principle of competition at its center, is the adequate reflection of “things as they are.” But they are, moreover—and this is absolutely crucial—, claiming that the *most appropriate (or at least the fatal)* option is to shape society according to “things as they are.” So there is a threefold decomposition which proves instructive:

Argument A:

- A(i) There exists an ontology, i.e., a way to describe “things as they are.”
- A(ii) Competitive capitalism is the arrangement which reflects this ontology.
- A(iii) What is ontological is also what is normative.

Now, argument A is obviously not an ethical argument; one would much rather call it a “fatalistic” argument, based on the premiss (A(iii)) that the true nature of things (supposing, with A(i), that it can be discovered) should be what determines the actual functioning of society. In fact, point A(iii) reflects a kind of *stoic* attitude according to which that which “is” cannot be stopped, and hence must be accepted. I will argue that *within the standard conceptual framework of economics*, this is the fundamental justification of competition. To understand why, let us see look at the two main “alternative” arguments in favor of competition.

Ontology could be challenged on grounds of the obvious fact that the organization of society and of economic life relies fundamentally on *human*

agency. Members of a society have the power—at least in the kinds of society I will be investigating here—to influence the way in which the economy functions; the principle of competition can hardly be labelled a “fatality.” This is all the more so because defenders of competition rather often invoke the argument of the *doux commerce*, according to which economic “conflict” is itself already a strongly sublimated version of armed conflict; competition, as it were, appears as a means that human beings have found in order to avoid bloody warfare. But has this argument about civilization any reason to stop there? If economic competition is one way to sublimate natural aggressiveness, does it follow that it is the *only* one, let alone the *best* one? A flaw of the ontological argument, then, seems to be that it has no means to justify why common sense, education, and so on, are unable to move Man beyond competition. Somehow, the civilizing process is believed to possess an inherent limit, and economic competition is singled out as the optimal balance between, roughly, the desire to *kill* and the need to cooperate in order not to *be killed*.

So it seems that anyone who is not shocked by the two examples I gave would have to come up with a more convincing argument than a mere recourse to ontology or natural law. The most immediate one is simply—as implicitly contained in the utilitarian view outlined earlier—that competition is *good for society*. It exerts people to make the greatest possible efforts out of fear of losing positions or advantages, it imposes a tendency for prices to be as low as possible (which means, basically, equal to marginal cost), and it supposedly—although this argument is highly questionable in any market where customers are not well informed about the product—also promotes high quality and reliability. Furthermore, these advantages are assumed to more than offset the drawbacks illustrated in my above examples. Therefore, competitive capitalism ought to be encouraged because of its overall positive effect on social welfare. In a nutshell, we have therefore:

Argument B:

- B(i) The aim of society is to maximize total welfare.
- B(ii) Competitive capitalism is the arrangement which maximizes total welfare.

In argument B, the principle of competition is, in a way, instrumental in the attainment of a *consequentialist* objective, namely the maximization of total welfare. (I should note that an ordinalist equivalent of this claim

would be that competition leads to a Pareto efficient allocation of resources. This is weaker than the idea of maximizing total welfare, but it is obviously in the same spirit.) A related, but in fact different, defense of competition lies in a *deontological* view according to which the principle of competition promotes effort—both in work intensity and in quality—which, in itself, is a good:

Argument C:

- C(i) The aim of society is to maximize the quantity of effort exerted by its members.
- C(ii) Competitive capitalism is the arrangement which maximizes this quantity of effort.

Although B and C are often confused in casual discussion, and there is good reason for this: although they appear to be different, they in fact have a common basis. C is subsumed in B. The underlying logic is that, through lower prices, better quality and wider choice, people will be better off. Underlying the argument for maximum effort is an idea of making mankind ever more felicitous through the provision—through increased effort—of ever cheaper, ever better and diverse commodities and services. The argument of “virtuous” competition draws its substance from the argument of “welfare-maximizing” competition. So clearly, argument C(ii) gets its ultimate validity from argument B(ii).

Argument B constitutes is usually considered to be a *moral* advocacy of competition. At first glance, it appears to be moral in a sense in which argument A is not, as it makes explicit reference to an idea of goodness. Indeed, this is why I said B and C were usually called in to supplement argument A. However, this is really only a superficial difference, because in fact argument A(ii) is just as implicit in argument B(ii) as the latter was in argument C(ii). In other words, B (and hence C) in fact presupposes A, in the sense that “the best way for things to be” is best *because* it is also the way things *are*. Total-welfare maximization, then, also corresponds to what is ontological. This is because, if one views competition as oriented towards the maximization of individual welfare — as the ontological argument, which bears upon “human nature,” must presuppose, and as economics also presupposes since it relies on the basic postulate of utility maximization — total welfare turns out to be maximized as well. In fact, the arguments in B and C which rely on a notion of “goodness” cannot dispense with an ontological foundation of this goodness, and one based on the particular ontological postulates of economics. This means that *in fact A, B and C are*

all embedded into one another: ontology is subsumed in welfare maximization, which itself is subsumed in the virtue of maximal effort. The argument which brings A, B and C together into one single justification is that (i) economic competition is instrumental in maximizing effort, that (ii) maximal effort is good for society as a whole, and that (iii) what is good for society as a whole is for people to behave according to their ontology, that is, according to the way economists believe people *do* act. Hence competition is *fine finalis* justified *only on ontological grounds*. It is best for people because it allows people to behave “naturally.” In Heideggerian terms (see Heidegger, 1927), competitive behavior is part and parcel of Man’s *Dasein*, his “being-in-the-world,” marked by Man’s deeply entrenched care for himself (*Sorge*).²

Although all three arguments in favor of competition are nested arguments, they nevertheless deserve to be kept distinct. The reason is that they share a basic feature which turns out to play a substantial role in the analysis of competition: they all give a reason for the necessity of sacrificing existing initiatives (be they individual jobs or whole firms) for the sake of ever more “efficient” ones. None of them is prepared to see in the unfortunate pharmaceutical employee or the unlucky manager of the car-tube factory as anything other than sad but necessary casualties of a fundamentally virtuous—or at least unstoppable—process. Their answer to my above examples is simply, “Yes, tough luck, but there’s a higher force at work here, you see...” In all three cases, there is at work a *totality*, as it were, which views individual *selves* as substitutable entities.

3. Instrumentalization

Although I agree fundamentally with neither of them, I realize that both arguments B and C—which have turned out to be two versions of the ontological argument A—might be defended as justifications of the necessity of individual sacrifice. In B, individual sacrifice is justified simply

² Martin Heidegger’s central notion of “care” (*Sorge*) cannot be developed here. It pertains essentially to the phenomenological description of what it means for Man to “be.” Care is the mode in which all of us “are-in-the-world”: we care for our well-being, we seek to perpetuate our being—the latter meaning not just needs satisfaction but any modality of being, such as for instance social life (“being-with-others”). This is quite close to what John Broome (1991) advocates when he says that the economic notion of “utility” ought to be confined strictly to the representation of preferences (rather than pure welfare or need satisfaction). The two basic modes of being posited by Heidegger, “being-alone” and “being-with,” are analyzed nicely (though with a fair degree of simplification) in the four first chapters of Stephen Batchelor (1983).

by the requirement of adding to total welfare, a well-known consequence of utilitarian reasoning. In C, individual sacrifice is justified by the lack of sufficient effort by the “victims”: The pharmaceutical employee *could* have worked harder and *could* have matched his young colleague’s performance; he just was apparently not willing to do so. Similarly, the workers in the tube plant *could* have matched the Asian competitors’ performance; but apparently, their life aspirations kept them from accepting that their salary be divided by ten...³ The fundamental objection against either argument is that they both *instrumentalize* human lives for the sake of a norm of totality—total welfare, or the intrinsic moral goodness of effort.

Admittedly, the two totalities are of a rather different nature. Whereas the total-utility objective clearly involves the instrumentalization of human existence because some individuals are sacrificed for greater overall welfare, a subordination to an ethics of effort might be argued to be, after all, simply one way of getting something valuable out of people’s lives. Our existence, it can be argued, is anyway given to us for the fulfillment of something, and this “something” necessarily requires the use of certain means; if following an ethics of effort represents an instrumentalization of human existence, then so does *any other* ethical norm. This argument is, indeed, worth dwelling on. It forces us to make more explicit our unease with argument C—and by the same token, perhaps with all *overarching* ethical norms potentially present in the principle of competition.

The problem with example 1 is, in fact, that our pharmaceuticals employee ends up losing his job because he does not comply with the *single most demanding* standard, namely his young colleague’s effort input. Example 2 displays a similar feature. And I think a central characteristic of competition—indeed, the characteristic which makes competition so likeable for many liberals—is that it forces upon all contestants, at all times, the single most demanding standard of the moment, one which in most cases has arisen exogenously and quite independently of anyone’s desert or laziness, and demands that this standard be met from now on, lest the “losers” be ejected from the newly re-formatted contest. This periodical re-

³ Those economists who do not believe in the ability of “the market” to attain *instant* equilibrium will usually invoke the existence of “adjustment costs.” If competition suddenly forces a whole firm to relocate and demands of the workers that they move from Belgium to Portugal if they want to keep their jobs, this is analyzed under the rather impersonal heading of adjustment costs due to sluggish labor mobility. The impersonality of labels such as this is, as we shall see below, one of the reasons why economists usually fail to grasp the full extent of the *violence* of competition.

formatting is the essence of the competitive process. It ensures that all market participants are “kept on their toes.” The increasing sophistication of means of communication and the evolution of many markets into world markets have made this sensitivity to re-formatting even greater; example 2 is a perfect instance of how easily exogenous pressures from even faraway foreign competitors can speed up the destruction of some market actors. Widespread competition forces a commitment to continually keep up with the highest quality and lowest price standards existing, or at least with the highest quality/ price ratio available on the market. As such, it is a simple and efficient provider of incentives, and all competition policies are aimed at making this provider of incentives work as well as possible.

It is hard to deny the validity of the claim that competition creates incentives; and still, I feel great unease with this idea when it comes to its concrete, daily consequences. The reason is that, again, in the examples I have given there is nothing particularly *wrong* with people’s behavior as producers. Simply, it turns out that at some point in time, their usual input of effort, which ensured their success up to that moment, *suddenly* becomes insufficient. Work effort is thus singled out as the only ethically relevant dimension of human action, at the expense of *all other dimensions of life*. Even the often discussed “protestant work ethic,” which takes as its premiss the idea that work is morally important because it disciplines human life and makes individuals realize the interdependence of their fates—even this work ethic cannot justify the subordination of individual *levels* of effort to the comparison-driven incentive mechanism which underlies competitive forces. The instrumentalization underlying argument C is not, upon deeper reflexion, deducible from any specific “work ethic”; it flows rather from a much deeper source located on the *demand side* of the market.

4. □ Consumerism

Underlying everything that has been said up to now about the consequences of the competitive process is the following obvious, but often insufficiently emphasized truth: There would be no competition, ever, if there were no *actively searching consumers*. Neo-classical theory has it clear that consumers’ search activity—i.e., the search for the highest quality/ price ratio—is absolutely central in driving competition. The higher the search costs, the less perfect the information of consumers, and the less strong competition. This is obvious. In fact, consumer search activity is really the

only driving force of competition, both effective and potential. (In the case of potential competition, what is important is the “expected” search activity of consumers in the hypothetical case of entry of a cheaper and/or higher-quality competitor.) This being established, it becomes clear that *it is the attitude of the consumers, i.e., of the demand side of the market, which caters to the producers’ being “choicelessly” subordinated to competitive forces.* What drives competition is the fact that each and every consumer is continually chasing after the lowest quality/ price ratio. Albert Hirschman (1970) has termed this, classically, the consumers’ ever present “exit option” under competitive circumstances. As Lutz and Lux (1979, p. 105) put it,

Everybody is struggling to make it, cutting costs wherever possible in order to survive, but nobody is a winner except the consumer, who gets what he or she wants at the lowest possible cost. Here is the basis for the concept of *consumer sovereignty*. It means the consumer is king. He dictates production. (...) The economist’s dream world of perfect competition is a world of profit maximizers struggling to satisfy the royal consumer.

While their comment bears mainly on the abstract concept of “perfect competition” as modelled in standard neo-classical theory (and this is the case also for Knight’s critique of competitive capitalism, as emphasized by Kirzner, 1994), much the same can be said of virtually any system in which there is some competition going on. Even if consumer sovereignty is more or less limited by the firms’ market power, it is still the fact of consumer search which propels the whole competitive process. Of course, firms acknowledge this and feed this search through various channels (advertising) through which they attempt to attract the consumers’ attention and frequently even to create new needs. Part of this feeding itself caters to what Frank Knight (1923) saw as the “competitive *game*.” Entrepreneurs engage in a race for consumers in part out of a desire for “fun and games”:

...□the motive of business is to (...) a large extent that of emulation as such. Industry and trade is a competitive game, in which men engage in part from the same motives as in other games or sports. This is not a matter of want-satisfaction in any direct or economic sense; the “rewards” of successful participation in the game are not wanted for any satisfying power dependent on any quality which they possess as things, but simply as insignia of success in the

game, like the ribbons, medals, and the like which are conferred in other sorts of contests. (Knight, 1923, p. 484)

Still, the bottom line is undoubtedly that it is consumer behavior which drives the whole process—which Knight acknowledged by saying that the economic system is *both* a device for engaging in competitive sport *and* a device for satisfying material needs: “Economic activity is *at the same time* a means of wants–satisfaction, an agency for want– and character–formation, a field of creative self–expression, and a competitive sport” (*ibid.*, p. 485). In example 1, the employee ends up ill and depressed *fine finalis* because consumers are sensitive to the efforts of German competitors to lower costs. In example 2, the role of demand (in this case, the car builders’ demand) is even more direct. In the capitalist economy, the continual shift of demand from product to cheaper (or better) product is accelerated by the increasing disconnection between actual producers and buyers: Products are sold by intermediaries (pharmacies, car sellers) who are themselves subordinated to the competitive logic, so that the direct producers are in fact under an n –fold pressure coming from buyers but primarily from the $n-1$ intermediaries who distribute the products and are free to distribute those which appeal most to the buyers.

Overall, this points to the *increasing anonymity of the capitalist system of commerce* as an important driving force of current competitive forces. Consumers do not care from which distributor they buy the products, and distributors do not care whose products they sell, so long as there are consumers in sufficient number. Even so, the primary driving force is still *the continually searching, optimizing consumer*. For him, the function of competition, the *only* function of competition, is that of driving prices down and—if possible, though this may not always occur—quality up. Competition policies such as that soon to be implemented in the European Union’s Single Market clearly acknowledge this “consumer–friendly” function of competition and devise all sorts of rules in order to further it. The underlying logic is that people *as consumers* will be better off—that is why competition is encouraged. Underlying the whole process is, deeply entrenched, an ideal of making mankind ever more felicitous through the provision of ever cheaper, ever better and diverse commodities and services. We are in a purely utilitarian view of society, with a very important specification: individual welfares depend on material commodity allocations in such a way that, in the aggregate, *any* cost and/ or quality advantage derived from increased competition outweighs *any* employment

or other disadvantage. Without this specification of individual preferences, argument B would not have such a weight.

Fundamentally, it is the “reign of the consumer” which makes the economic system so desperately dependent on competitive pressures and creates examples such as those I gave at the beginning. Widespread consumer search and arbitrage leads to mechanical shifts in demand from one producer to another as a function of largely exogenous shocks. Stiglitz (1994) claims that “the information provided by competition provides vital information in judging how well a firm is doing. (...) Should the firm be trying harder? Is it doing as well as it could be?” Clearly, however, the process impelled by consumer arbitrage does more than just provide an *absolute* standard of comparison between firms (or, for that matter, between individuals within firms); it provides, as I indicated, a *continually shifting* standard.

5. □ The negation of exteriority

The consequences of this are quite sizeable. The race for consumers (I am assuming throughout that, roughly, a firm’s profits are positively related to its market share) obviously provides the fundamental impetus for *rivalry* between firms (as exemplified by example 2). This *inter*–firm rivalry, in turn, fosters *intra*–firm rivalry between individuals (as exemplified by example 1). Moreover, there is clearly a constant attempt of producers to control this consumer–impulsed process by taking over the formation of needs and *shaping* them through advertising and through the creation of “fashions.” This means that there is quite clearly, in the eyes of firms, an anonymization of customers, which balances the anonymization operated by the customers themselves among the firms from which they buy products. This virtually total anonymity, which is a well–known feature of capitalist competition, is what makes the sudden consequences of competitive pressures so systemic and so devoid of any necessary connection to actual desert—except insofar as a firm succeeds in re–shaping consumer tastes to its own advantage. Desert appears mainly in this ability to *innovate* whereas, as I argued earlier, there is to me no convincing reason to say that a producer who did not match *all* his competitors’ performances on an *existing* market. So there are two groups facing each other on markets: the group of firms within which competitors are anonymously facing one another and which is anonymous from the

viewpoint of the group of consumers, and this group of consumers which is in turn anonymous from the viewpoint of the group of firms. The word "group" should not mislead us here; no large group of firms and/ or consumers is necessary as is the case in markets with "strong" competition: Oligopolies and oligopsonies are also anonymous in the sense discussed here to the extent that they rely on intermediation. (The only case which lies outside my present analysis is the—very rare—one of a monopoly facing a market with very few consumers. All other cases display anonymity in the sense discussed here.) Moreover, competing firms are simply anonymous entities facing one another in a contest the very nature of which they fail to control. And it is all these modalities of anonymity which truly lie at the very root of the instrumentalization operated by competitive forces. *Competition by its very constitution generates a negation of individual exteriority*, in the sense that it "covers up" individual selves with a totality inside which persons exist only as substitutable entities. The other is certainly exterior *to me* in the sense that he is *not myself*, but the other's *fundamental exteriority*, his being a person never defined by his belonging to any *totality*, is inevitably denied in the interaction organized by competition. Moreover, since this totality is always a content of consciousness, the other becomes "part of me" through this totality to which I ascribe him. Thus the other's "other-ness" is fundamentally negated. (See e.g. Wyschogrod, 1992.)

This is simply a phenomenological statement embodying *per se* no value judgment. It is in the fundamental nature of economic competition to operate such an occultation of individual identities. As within any contest, in competition the "other" is *nothing but* an entity standing in the way of, or being at hand as a tool for, "my" achievement—if this were not so there would be no "com-petition," which etymologically means the common pursuit of a common goal. The other is no longer a person with his own specific subjectivity, aspirations, fears, hopes, etc., but only one of the "things" which might bar my own passage or serves my own goal. The other has become part of the totality which I am facing, and which I fear or use.

Is this, beyond the phenomenological description, also a moral problem? I think it is, although many might disagree. In particular, persons defending conception A will deny that any moral problem is involved, whereas in fact *I think the necessary negation of exteriority is the single most important moral problem connected with competition*, because I do not believe—at

least not as much as some political philosophers in the analytic tradition, or as most economists—that “society” is just a composite magnitude made up of entities called “individuals.” One might object that in the competitive system everyone engages in the game voluntarily; while I disagree with this, I could even grant it and still reply that voluntariness does not mean that any two participants in the game are not denying *each other’s* exteriority. (Again, I should insist: Individual *x* of course sees individual *y* as physically exterior to himself, but throughout the competitive process *x* views *y* as interior to a totality called, for example, “my competitors” or “my opponents,” and since this totality is always already apprehended by *x’s* consciousness, in fact *y* becomes “part of” *x*, no longer fully exterior.)

In the discussion of this question, I will rely extensively on the work of Emmanuel Levinas (1982a, 1990) who has tried to argue that there is much more going on in the notion of “sociality” than merely a juxtaposition of individuals. There is, or there ought to be if the very notion of a *relationship* is to be upheld, a unicity in every person which cannot be erased by any systemic or totalizing mode of thought. This may sound like a rather unorthodox idea to many, but I think in the reflexion on competition and its ethical value it holds great promise. For the necessity of my present argument, I will—because I think there are good reasons for this—identify competition with warfare, and the “victory” in the competitive race as a form of “killing.” This may be considered extreme, but it is intimately connected with the idea that competition ontologically violates exteriority. Pushing the other aside as I would a material obstacle as part of the “totality” which obstructs my passage is, ontologically speaking, a form of killing, even if biological life is not in all cases threatened. In a metaphorical sense, firms can “kill” one another on a market; customers can “kill” a firm by arbitraging away from it in favor of another firm; and people can “kill” one another in competing for jobs or positions. In a much more literal sense, a firm can kill people if it decides to relocate and to move from one country to another almost overnight, leaving all its former employees with the choice between being jobless and uprooting their current way of life by moving. □⁴

⁴ It is symptomatic of the ontological orientation of economics, and its evident connection with Darwinian evolutionism, that capitalist competition was termed by the Austrian school, and in particular by Schumpeter, “creative destruction.” Virtually all economists, from Alfred Marshall (1920) to Robert Nelson and Sydney Winter (1982), have emphasized the “creative” side and viewed destruction as a mere by-product of competition. It can hardly be denied that this is a grossly eugenic orientation; perhaps

Now economic theory will grasp most of these casualties under the heading of *adjustment costs*. The reason, it is said, why “market forces” fail to reach “equilibrium” instantly is that there are various forms of “sluggishness”—but in fact this sluggishness (for instance in the case of trade union resistance) is very often rooted in the attempts of *individual human beings* to survive to the pressures imposed by competition. It is symptomatic of the way economics deals with individual lives that the deep-rooted violence of competition—which we shall be further analyzing below—is covered up with the impersonal expression of “adjustment costs.” It is true that, in one way, competition most often does not eject its losers but merely transforms them: jobless iron workers become textile workers and then, when joblessness hits once more, they either go on pension or convert again into—say—low-grade computer technicians. Rather than being kept in their original jobs at all costs they might, upon reconversion, be “compensated” for the hardships imposed upon them by the demands of competition. However, such a compensatory scheme involves the very same reasoning as that involved in competitive reasoning itself: individual lives are and remain just “grist for the mill.” The violence inherent in competition is not put into question; it is merely softened. My present investigation of competition as a mode of behavior aims deeper.

Levinas claims that if a criminal or a soldier were to *really* look his victim *in the face*, which would mean really being fully present to the other as a person who is not himself and is also not an object “eaten up” by his consciousness, then he could not possibly kill that person. By the same token, I think one could say that really entering in a *face-à-face* with a person would make competition with that person—whether as an opponent of as a tool—impossible, or unbearable. That is, in fact, precisely why competition is usually mediated by firms and other “anonymous” organizations, and why for instance personalized rivalry is so destructive from the personal point of view. It is as though we *knew* that we would not want to compete amongst ourselves openly, person to person, for jobs or anything else; so we do it *via* the whole economic structure. As I explained above, the positive effects of competition seem to be maintainable only at the cost of a strong “anonymization” of human interactions.

the profession could profit from sometimes reversing the description of competitive forces and terming them instead “destructive creation.”

But if this is so, is competitive behavior really (1) an inherent part of human nature, or even (2) a “mode of being-in-the-world” in the sense of Heidegger’s *existentials* (see Heidegger, 1927)? In section 2 above we saw that the answer to both questions was Yes. We saw that competition as a mode of human behavior could *fine finalis* be justified *only* ontologically, that is, in terms of an appeal to “the way things are” given the particular postulates that economics makes about human nature. Levinas argues that the reliance on ontology needs to be abandoned because, precisely, it prompts the constant interference of arguments about “the way things are” in ethical evaluation. His whole philosophical endeavor is aimed at ripping ethical thought from its ontological surroundings; ontology, according to Levinas, can *never* serve as the appropriate context for ethical evaluation. Levinas’s vision will not be used here out of mere exegetical interest. Rather, I will show that it leads us to apprehending competition as a negation of the Other as a heteronomous, “exterior” individual. This, as we shall see presently, will provide us with powerful concepts for a very radical critique of competition as an economic motive.

6. The impossibility of ethically justifying competition

To introduce the discussion, I would like to quote a long passage from the very last pages of Levinas’s interview book *Éthique et infini* (1982a), where the author discusses the question of “fear for the other.” It turns out, I believe, that what Levinas is saying is of paramount importance for an in-depth, sober understanding of economic life. Here is the passage:

Philippe Nemo.—“But if one fears for the other and not for oneself, it is possible even to live?”

Emmanuel Levinas.—“Indeed, that is the question we must eventually ask. Do I owe myself to Being [l’être]? By being [étant], by persisting in Being, am I not killing?”

Ph. N.—“Of course, now that we are familiar with the biological paradigm, we know that any species lives at the expense of another and that within each species any individual replaces another. One cannot live without killing.”

E. L.—“In society as it functions now, it is not possible to live without killing, or at least preparing someone’s death. Consequently, the important question concerning the

meaning of Being is not “Why is there something rather than nothing?”—the Leibnizian question which Heidegger so profusely commented—but “Do I not kill by being?”

Ph. N.—□ From this observation that one cannot live without murder or at least without struggle, others would draw the conclusion that one must, in fact, kill, and that violence serves life and directs evolution. Do you refuse this reply?

E. L.—□ The dislocation [éclatement] of the human within Being, (...) the crisis of Being, the otherwise–than–Being, are indeed marked by the fact that what is the most natural becomes the most problematic. Do I have the right to be? By being in the world, am I not taking someone’s place? This challenges the naive and natural perseverance within Being!

Ph. N.—□ As an epitaph to *Otherwise Than Being*, you quote a sentence by Pascal: “*Here is my place in the sun. This is the beginning and the image of the usurpation of the whole world*” and “*We have made use of concupiscence as best we could in order to make it serve the public good. But this was only fake, and a false image of charity. Deep down, it is only hate.*” If, however, one goes along with you in considering that this is the ultimate, or last, question of metaphysics, how do you set your own answer going? Will you go as far as saying that you do not have the right to live?

E.L.—□ I certainly do not want to teach that the love of one’s neighbor and the truly human life entail suicide. What I mean is that a truly human life cannot remain a life that is *satisfied* of its own equality within Being, a life of quietude, that it awakens to the other, that Being never—contrary to what so many reassuring traditions are saying—constitutes its own *raison d’être*, that the famous *conatus essendi* is not the source of all right and all meaning [de tout droit et de tout sens].

Levinas’s view provides a powerful benchmark against which to test our own convictions about competition. It must be remembered here that Levinas’s aim is to criticize Heidegger’s (1927) “fundamental ontology,” not because it is false—he believes it is highly refined and correct—but because it cannot, according to him, exhaust the content of what it means for man to live a human life. Remaining at the level of ontology leads, according to Levinas, to a constitutive neglect of ethics and a legitimation of violence and war. He argues in favor of an “otherwise–than–Being” (*autrement*

qu'êtré) which would consist in man's going *beyond* just being-in-the-world, *beyond* ontology, and acknowledging his fundamental and inescapable *responsibility vis-à-vis* the Other. □ (See Levinas, 1961, 1974.) Individual responsibility, Levinas insists, extends far beyond what any individual has actually *done*. It is a "constitutive" responsibility which one becomes conscious of as one looks straight into the Face of the Other. (Levinas's concept of Face is complex; it does not refer just to the human face as a physical, observable phenomenon; it refers to the general fragility and vulnerability inherent in any human presence.) By identifying such a constitutive responsibility, Levinas constructs what he calls a "primary philosophy" (*une philosophie première*). This responsibility, which is a reflection of the Infinite radiating from the Face of the Other, is endless, and no one can ever claim that he has now done enough and can rest within the neutral flow of Being. This is the basis of Levinasian ethics—a demanding but powerful way to bring ethical concern into human life.

We need not develop the whole of Levinas's analysis here. For our present purposes, it is sufficient to see what his notion of *inescapable responsibility* means and implies. It means that by just "being there," we are already responsible for what our "being there" implies for others. Levinas intends this not as a deadly and unredeemable moral *accusation*, but rather as a *description* of what "being there" implies—in particular for man, one of whose fundamental features is to *be in relationship with* the Other. For any individual, being at fault *vis-à-vis* his fellow human beings is an *ontological datum*, one that, according to Levinas, entails no appeal to the effectiveness of forgiveness: "The intention is unable to accompany the act all the way down to its last ramifications, but the 'I' knows it is nevertheless responsible for these last ramifications. (...) The subject of fault receives the meaning of his Being from outside; he is no longer the man confessing his sins, but acknowledging the accusations" (Levinas, 1990, pp. 32–33). These are accusations we are locked into not because we are intentionally "bad," but simply because they are part and parcel of the very fact of being alive. □⁵ As we saw in the passage quoted above, Levinas claims that our individual responsibility is endless because "killing" or "taking someone else's place" is part of simply being in the world. Levinas makes it an *ontological datum* of

⁵ See Arnsperger (1996) for an attempt to grapple with Levinas's infinitely demanding notion of responsibility and to fit it into a more "measured" idea of responsibility by combining it with the Anglo-saxon notion of "responsibility for oneself."

existence. This is the sense in which “killing” has to be understood within the present frame of analysis.

To understand the consequences of a Levinasian view for our investigation of competition, it is important to be clear about how Levinas views socio-political society in general. The “anonymization” of human life through competition flows from what Levinas sees as the fundamentally *economic* character of social coexistence. Roger Burggraeve (1985, pp. 120–121) puts it as follows:

In the phenomenal, symbolic and “non-expressive” character of work lies its “market value.” The fact that the will escapes itself, that it does not contain or control itself in its work, implies that the others can subdue the work, can acquire it, buy and sell it, trade it. Here we (...) come up against the “intermediary meaning” or “mediatory value” of money. In a transaction via money, the work loses its “personal” meaning (i.e. its reference to its maker) in exchange for an instrumental or consumer meaning, which is general, i.e. which can be integrated into several projects of existence and receive meaning from them. Money, which makes trading works possible, concretely realizes man’s “quantification” and “generalization,” on which every socio-political society (both national and international) is based.

Indeed, the socio-political order can only reach and treat subjects via the economic path of works. Neither the intimacy of interiority nor the “disinterestedness” of ethical unicity escape it. It can only be directed toward what the subjects *do*, towards their works! It can only occupy itself with the regulation of relationships between the subjects in so far as these relationships take place via the objective mediation of works. The socio-political society “realizes its essence through works.” This method of approaching subjects through their works makes possible the state’s rational universality as well as that of every socio-political society (both intra- and supra-national), since no thought need be given to the “most subjective intentions” of the unique individual: for these are no longer present in the work itself. Thus the socio-political order is directed towards a “humanity of mutually replaceable people, of reciprocal relations” (...)

This (...) leads us to an important negative aspect of every socio-political society. For a society cannot take into consideration the most individual of needs, just because it approaches the individual, not on the basis of his

individuality and unicity, but on the basis of his ability to be universalized to a replaceable part of the whole.

Although Levinas does not discuss economic competition *per se*, it should be obvious from this interpretative passage that his thought leads directly into the very problem we are analyzing here. What Levinas's view prompts is a deep questioning, going way beyond questions of efficiency, of the very foundation of economic interaction based on competition. Simply by being alive within an economic system, we are guilty; each of us bears responsibility—far beyond our own intentionality—for any of the undesirable consequences of economic competition because each of us upholds the system itself by participating in it as regal consumers. Levinas's position is a radical rejection of arguments A, B and C together: ontology, even if indirectly present within the idea of a "common good," can never justify the encouragement of competition. This carries significantly further, and broadens the philosophical scope of, Knight's (1923) earlier conviction that "we appear to search in vain for any really ethical basis of approval for competition as a basis for an ideal type of human relations, or as a motive to action. It fails to harmonize either with the Pagan ideal of society as a community of friends or with the Christian ideal of spiritual fellowship." Levinas even more radically leads us to reject *any* form of ethical justification, on the basis of a strict refusal both of an ontological basis of ethics and of a social ideal based *fine finalis* on the ontical fact of man's being-in-the-world.

How crucial the demand side is in this context is shown by Knight's cogent remark about standard attempts to justify competition on grounds of efficiency and incentives: "Its only justification is that it is effective in getting things done; but any candid answer to the question, 'what things,' compels the admission that they leave much to be desired." An ethical justification based on human desire— or even preference—satisfaction is decisively wanting because it remains short of the transcendental respect for the Face.

7. □ New awareness and the "work-and-spend cycle"

The dead end into which we are led in trying to justify competition as an economic motive thus turns out to reflect a much deeper problem concerning the nature of ethical evaluation. What a Levinasian critique

brings up is a strong radicalization of a standard critique of utilitarianism—which we saw to be one of the fundamental doctrines underlying the justification of competition via argument B. It is well known that the classical utilitarian moral rule can imply the violation of basic human liberties (see e.g. Harsanyi, 1992 for a recent statement). However, none of the classical alternatives to utilitarian reasoning (such as liberalism) will do in a Levinasian perspective unless they *simultaneously* question *the very existence of competition itself*. As Knight's older criticism already indicated, what is intrinsically problematic with competition is not that it has bad consequences in *some* socio-political contexts, but that it violates very fundamentally the ethical—and hence, according to Levinas, pre-ontological—relationship between human beings.

Thinkers in the analytical tradition of political philosophy may at this point come up with a significant objection, namely that Levinas is unduly restricting the extent of social interaction on the basis of a *perfectionistic* position about what is “good.” To this one may reply as follows. The particularity of Levinas's position is that he locates ethics within the irreducibility, as it were, of the human-to-human relationship, social interaction being only an appendix and hence a post-ethical institution. This seems to me a highly valuable contribution, and one which from which many anglo-saxon contributions on social ethics might benefit. (On the incompatibility of Levinas and liberalism, see Ruol, 1994.)□Moreover, it can be accepted without going “all the way” and claiming, as Levinas (1982b) does, that the face of the Other *is in itself* the face of God as revealed in the Torah and commented in the Talmud. This surely represents a move into perfectionism, or at least makes perfectionism dangerously close. Such a move is unnecessary for my present purposes, however. The idea of a pre-ontological responsibility for the Other does introduce metaphysical concerns which are claimed to be absent from most of liberal doctrine.□⁶ It is nevertheless plain that the Levinasian non-consequentialism can be read

⁶ Although such an absence might be doubted strongly, as recently explained by Ricœur (1995) and Arnsperger (1995) among others concerning the role of *tolerance* as a necessary absolute value in Rawls. Liberal egalitarianism *à la* Rawls, it can be argued, has a chance only if all individuals agree on at least one thing: the imperative of giving tolerance the precedence over their own personal view of the good. When Rawls (1993) talks about “reasonable comprehensive doctrines of the good” which are apt to attain an “overlapping consensus,” he must have in mind the idea that a doctrine is reasonable *only if* it does not exclude tolerance. This might be viewed as a return of metaphysical concerns within a supposedly “purely political” theory.

in a similar way to the Rawlsian insistence on the use of “primary goods,” namely, as a formulation of a requirement that every person in society receive the proper *means* for the fulfillment of his goals in life. (See Rawls, 1971.) The absolute transcendence of the Other, which lies at the root of our present questioning of competition as an economic motive, has a status comparable to the absolute neutrality vis-à-vis conceptions of the good, which underlies liberal theory: In both cases, the idea is that there is a sphere of *instruments* for the fulfillment of individual goals. But admittedly, Levinas’s position is much more extreme than Rawls’s because it refuses symmetry and “equality” as a foundation for ethical judgement. Responsibility for the Other is only an “instrument” for the Other’s attainment of his life goals in the very fundamental sense in which air or vitamins are also “instruments” for any life to be even possible. Levinas locates the I–Other relationship before any social interaction as conceived by Rawls or most other political theorists.

Still, it seems undue to claim that Levinasian ethics is perfectionistic. If there is any way in which a Levinasian approach formulates what makes a “good life,” then the same must be true of a liberal who says—whether explicitly or implicitly—that tolerance has to underlie all social life. If the Other’s transcendence and absolute priority are viewed as a perfectionistic requirement, then so would have to be Rawls’s insistence on equality and impartiality. Hence the rejection, on Levinasian grounds, of competition as an economic motive—which echoes and radicalizes Knight’s earlier profound discussion—is valid even in a liberal context.

Ultimately, as should be clear from the earlier discussion, the Levinasian rejection of competition as an economic motive implies a rejection of consumerism, i.e., a refusal to grant the sphere of consumers the legitimacy of a merely anonymous search activity to “get the best bargain.” This founding canon of modern capitalism is what gets the whole “exteriority–negating” process going. It is, in fact, already *itself* a negation of exteriority in the sense that anonymous searching involves de–humanizing in a very radical way: I buy from *somewhere* rather than from *someone*. No doubt such a radical questioning will sound naive to the advocates of competition, and even to many of its critics. Indeed, how can this sort of objection to competition yield any “concrete” path of reform? Levinas himself has been abundantly criticized for presenting a refined thought on something (the deep–rooted negation of exteriority) which does not bite into politics. Since Levinas locates his ethical discourse *prior to* even any ontology *à la*

Heidegger, there seems to be no way to extract from it any but the vaguest socio-institutional implications.

This is certainly true, and my aim here is not to defend Levinas on this point. That his intuition, which we have developed here into a more precise analysis of the phenomenon of economic competition, is nevertheless relevant can be gathered from a much more “accessible” piece of work, namely Juliet Schor’s bestselling *The Overworked American* (1992). In that book, Schor carries out a detailed analysis of the reasons which have led American workers and employees to steadily increase their working hours over the last decades. She stresses several factors, one of which is the increasing sensitivity of firms to competitive pressures, and she witnesses in her field data direct illustrations of my example 1:

... however strong [the] cultural predisposition to hard work, “workaholicism” is to some extent a creation of the system, rather than its cause. As long as there are even a few workaholics, competition will force others to keep up. (...) This suggests that the workaholic can set the standard to which others are compelled to adhere. (Schor, 1992, p. 70)

To “exit the squirrel cage” created by a totally consumer-oriented society, Schor emphasizes the urgent need to break what she calls the “work-and-spend cycle.” This is a cycle whereby through complex interactions increased and increasingly varied consumer needs are met by stronger competition among firms and at the same time by rising income standards in the heads of employees. This in turn leads to longer work hours, which seems to stimulate the shopping spree even more, and so on. Schor focuses most of her analysis on the dynamic interaction between rising spending and rising consumer discontent, and this is a separate issue; but clearly, competition both fosters this dynamics and flows from it. Schor’s discussion strongly indicates that breaking this work-and-spend cycle is not alien to the need to break the mechanisms which propel the competitive process itself. In other words, the breaking of the work-and-spend cycle requires overthrowing the “royal consumer” in one way or another. Here is not the place to start thinking about this sort of reform. It is in fact, in itself, not an actual *reform* in the usual, institutional sense, but rather a process of gaining awareness and consciousness of the deep ethical issues underlying our capitalist societies and our modes of behavior—quite in the same way as Levinas’s philosophy calls not so much for overt revolution as for “an extreme crisis of conscience” (Burggraeve, 1985, p. 122). Like Levinas, although on another

level conceptually and philosophically, Schor advocates a change of behavior in terms of consumption based on personal conversion, so to speak: “By *understanding how we came to be caught up* in the cycle of work–and–spend, perhaps we can regain a reasonable balance between work and leisure” (p. 15, italics added).

The kind of problem analyzed in the preceding pages is rather specific in nature. Overcoming some of the negative effects of competition can be done with the help of public policy, consisting mainly in *restricting*, rather than expanding, the scope of competition. William Baumol (1991) shows how the integration of ethical priorities into economic behavior is dependent on policies of coordination through the state because competition on contestable markets reduces entrepreneurs’ margin for ethical behavior to virtually zero. On a more empirical and transnational level, the work coordinated by Riccardo Petrella (1995) also shows the urgent need for limitations of competition if the instrumentalization of human life is to be reduced. The problem of the negation of exteriority I am analyzing here, however, is an *ontological* problem, and as such is not easily amenable to policy measures. Restricting competition does not rid what remains of it of the fundamental trait of exteriority negation. This is a qualitative, rather than quantitative, problem. Accordingly—and this has been widely criticized by opponents of Levinas’s philosophy—the requirements are much more “moralistic” and individual; in the present context, it would involve the attempt to reduce the inherent tendency of consumers to “shop,” to look for the “very best bargain,” in an anonymous fashion and without thinking one moment of the numerous underlying interpersonal relationships which are thus being jeopardized. Such requirements would not consist in artificially limiting, or even in forbidding, competition; they would amount to undermining the very behavioral patterns which propel it.

Do these requirements, whose content has yet to be made explicit, invalidate all advocacies of competition based on efficiency or innovation arguments? Probably not, but the philosophical discussion in this paper implies that such arguments must be viewed as supporting a principle which, at a *fundamental* level, is *ethically undefendable*. To Knight’s proposition that competition’s “only justification is that it is effective in getting things done; but [that] any candid answer to the question, ‘what things,’ compels the admission that they leave much to be desired,” Levinas’s positions concerning the priority of human relationship and

exteriority prompt us to add the even more crucial question: “How are these things done?” While economic competition can legitimately be viewed as the replacement of overt war with the apparently pacific exercise of *doux commerce*, it in fact contains a form of deep-rooted violence which only a powerful philosophical concept such as Levinas’s *face-à-face* is able to uncover. Economists stay blind to such a violence because their own conceptual tools are by construction unable to detect it.

It does appear then that, ethically speaking, a significant — and, I believe, thoroughly fatal — amount of glory has been taken out of the principle of competition as an economic motive. That economists might nevertheless defend competition on the grounds of efficiency and/ or innovativeness is likely, but in that case they now have to answer quite explicitly to the question as to why they believe these advantages of competition should override the very deep ethical defects which have been expounded here. As economists, we might believe that all this talk about the Levinasian *face-à-face* is all good and well, but that it forbids any form of concrete social organization because it is too particular-oriented, too intolerant of any “systemic” rules overriding human relationships. And *as economists* we may thus be led to defend the competitive system; however, the analysis presented here forces us at the same time to see this system for what it is, and to realize what our defense of competition as a mode of economic behavior entails at a deeper level. Ultimately, the issue is that of (i) the link that exists between economics and ontology and (ii) the detrimental consequences that such a link has for the kinds of modes of behavior which economists caution.

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