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The Anatomy of Aggression

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THE ANATOMY OF AGGRESSION

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...Men are continually in competition for honour and dignity...; and consequently amongst men there ariseth on that ground, envy and hatred, and finally war....

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*

QUITE mundane pursuits as well as lofty attempts to achieve the extraordinary turn us against each other in tragic, insidious ways. These pursuits give rise to an "invisible hand" that, far from guiding people toward happiness, steers them instead toward confrontation and aggression. People end up literally making war in order to secure a good life. My aim here is to lay bare mechanisms by which our undertakings make aggressors of us. I begin with an analysis of competition, aggression, and related phenomena.

COMPETITION

Competition pits individual against individual or group against group. Games involving winners and losers, such as poker and races, are relatively low-key cases of competition; others, such as boxing matches and wars for territory, are more dangerous. The common element in these cases is rivalry, the struggle among agents trying to outdo each other in some pursuit. In fact, people may be said to be *competing* with each other just in case there is some item X that each seeks, and each, in pursuing X, is aware of taking (or being prepared to take) steps which make it more difficult for the others to attain X. By contrast, people are *cooperating* just in case there is some item Y that each seeks, and each, in pursuing Y, is aware of taking (or being prepared to take) steps which *help* the others to attain Y.

When rivals confront each other, they are after some *competitive property*, a property with the following feature: where along a dimension an item is required to fall in order to have that property depends on where along it other items of the same sort actually fall. What it takes for a person to qualify as *best surgeon*, for instance, depends on where other surgeons fall along the dimension of surgical expertise. Two further examples of competitive properties are *being unique, or exceptional, in some given respect.* These are also properties that not everyone could *possibly* have; they are *necessarily nonuniversalizable.* Other competitive properties are only *contingently nonuniversalizable*: they are nonuniversalizable only as a matter of fact, and could be possessed by everyone were the world different. An example: *exclusively owning a home in Manhattan.*

The members of a group of people will compete with each other just in case each is sufficiently motivated to secure the same nonuniversalizable competitive property. If a group of us all aim at *being the best writer of the group*, a necessarily nonuniversalizable competitive property, then any progress one of us makes toward that goal will constitute a setback for at least one of the others, and the success of anyone will require the defeat of everyone else. Similarly, desiring the (contingently nonuniversalizable) property of *being well fed* will make competitors of us when food is scarce. In seeking a nonuniversalizable competitive property, people become rivals, and hence competitors. But some competitive properties need not make rivals of their pursuers. Many such properties are actually universalizable; an example is *being unique in at least some respect.* People who acquire universalizable properties may do so without interfering with the attempts of others to reach the same goal, and hence competition need not result.

Anytime a group is competing, the desire for a *nonuniversalizable* competitive property is motivating its members. Still, a situation in which we are

each pursuing (competing for) the *one* goal of being well fed can just as well be described as one in which *several* goals are being pursued: *my* desire is that *I* be well fed, while yours is that *you* be well fed, and similarly with the other people. Thus there is a sense in which we each have our separate desires rather than a common goal. Yet each of our desires is an indexical variant of the others: each expresses the goal that an individual end up with a specific competitive property, in this case *being well fed.*

Already we can see that most of us have aspirations that bring us into competition with other people. In turn, this competition frequently generates aggressive and evil behavior. How it does so I shall discuss after making a few points about the nature of evil and aggression.

Evil and Aggression

The most seriously immoral acts are those of people who aim to cause misfortune and do so because they believe it to be intrinsically valuable. What such people regard as intrinsically good is *misfortune*, which, I shall assume, involves substantial harm; the acts by which they pursue their goal are therefore irremediably evil.

Acts that are less serious may be at least prima facie evil as well. The point of the qualifier "prima facie" is that in unusual circumstances a prima facie evil act may be morally permissible. It is possible for us to do something designed to harm others substantially even though we do not regard the worsening of their prospects as good in itself. To *cause* others a misfortune is, of course, just to cause a situation which itself constitutes a misfortune for them. By contrast, our act is *designed* to cause them a particular misfortune, *M*, if and only if we want to cause *M because* we think *M* is a misfortune-constituting situation. Hence planning to cause someone a particular misfortune entails planning to bring about a misfortune-constituting situation, but it is possible that we value producing that situation entirely for instrumental reasons rather than because we think it intrinsically valuable. If an adolescent destroys someone's prized car solely because his peers have pressured him into finding some way to create misery for another, and he wants to avoid becoming the object of ridicule, then he has designedly harmed another without regarding it as intrinsically valuable. Nonetheless, his act is prima facie evil, and almost certainly unqualifiedly evil.

All acts that are designed to cause misfortune are serious enough to be prima facie evil. The same is true of acts that cause anticipated but unintended and unwanted misfortune. If I decide that the only way to save my starving children is to rob you of your life savings, I know that I am causing you a grave loss, but the fact that I anticipate your loss does not mean I intend or want it. I would prefer that you not undergo a misfortune, and would have robbed you even if it were not a loss for you. While such acts (that cause anticipated but unintended harm) are, ceteris paribus, immoral, nevertheless acts intended to cause harm are more serious than ones that cause unintended but foreseen misfortune, which in turn are worse than ones causing anticipat*able* (but unforeseen) misfortune.

These prima facie evil acts, including the last and least serious, are all acts of aggression. For "aggression" refers to acts intended to cause significant harm to others, and even to acts that cause anticipatible misfortune. When the harm we cause is reasonably easy to predict we are still aggressors even if we did not make the prediction, say because we wanted to accomplish some goal so badly that we ignored the suffering we would cause others. A great deal of self-deception is involved in the way people represent to themselves the contexts in which they pursue their ends. There are a thousand ways to rationalize even those acts whose harmful consequences we admit to ourselves; and where rationalization fails, we can refuse to admit to ourselves the unsavoriness of the means we use to pursue our ends. I see no reason to withhold the epithet "aggressor" from those who delude themselves about the pain for which they are responsible. Anticipatible misfortune ought to be anticipated; those who neglect to think out the consequences of their acts are still culpable.

Thus on my account acts of aggression may or may not be evil, and while there is always a prima facie case against them, that case sometimes will be outweighed. When aggression is the only means to prevent much greater evil, when it is required to rectify an injustice, and when the victim consents to (risk) the misfortune, aggression is often permissible.

Only acts, not omissions, can constitute aggression. A physician's decision not to give a new life-saving drug to patients who subsequently die does

not constitute aggression even if the drug is easily available. Not administering a drug is an omission. By contrast, blocking access to a life-saving drug is an act, and constitutes aggression.

My use of the term "aggression" is in tension with that given it by theorists who maintain that aggression is innate. According to innatists, animals like fishes are capable of aggression, and observations about the behavior of animals constitute the main evidence for the nativist thesis. Few if any animals other than people know what constitutes a misfortune, and so few could anticipate harm, though many kinds of animals have an inborn tendency to attack members of their own species in certain circumstances. Of all animals, then, human beings seem uniquely capable of aggression in my sense of the term.

Whether and in what sense a tendency, instinct or drive to attack others is an innate feature of human beings is an important, politically-charged issue. The literature on the topic is extensive but in my opinion far from conclusive.[1] Culture inspires so many motivations which themselves would lead to attack behavior that it seems premature to posit an innate tendency to attack others. Thus greed, ambition, and "competition for honour and dignity" (to use Hobbes' phrase) could easily inspire attacks on others; I have seen no one argue that they are innate drives, however, and it is far-fetched to say that they are themselves inspired by a (sublimated?) urge to attack others since they are better suited to explain that urge than the latter is to explain *them*. Fortunately, I need not resolve the innatism issue because my focus is on describing certain sorts of goal that generate the desire to cause misfortune, and these desires could be innate, acquired, or themselves the product of innate drives. So my account is compatible with both nativism and antinativism.

The characterization of aggression as acts causing anticipatible misfortune is suggestive. If correct, then a key to aggression is understanding why people come to value the misfortune of others. I will suggest that they do so for the same reasons that they value successful competition.

The Misfortune of Others

Suppose that you and I and several others attribute intrinsic value or at least great importance to being the fastest runner of the group. Then we may or may not undertake a *contest* to determine who is fastest; indeed, if being fastest is very important to us, yet we are unsure of our skill, we may prefer to avoid a contest, thereby avoiding the risk of losing. But we will still compete. For we will seek the means to beat the others, by endless jogging, eating certain foods, etc. Assuming that we are aware of the value the others attribute to being fastest, and that we do not deceive ourselves, then we will realize that any significant steps we take in our competition constitute misfortune for the others, for substantial progress we make toward being fastest makes it significantly harder for the others to achieve something important to them, which is a misfortune for them. Hence we are aggressors.

The *mere* anticipatability of the fact that we are about to harm others would make us the least objectionable sort of aggressor. More serious aggression is generated by competitions whose participants *want* to cause each other misfortune. Precisely this occurs when our interest in winning comes to be linked to a concern that *their* winning be important to others. This linkage will occur when people who consider being fastest intrinsically valuable (or at least very important) decide to race as a means of obtaining the competitive property of *being proven the speediest*. If you and I form such a group, then the steps I take not only cause you misfortune, but are designed to do so, and hence (unless mitigating circumstances obtain) constitute evil—similarly for you and the others. I know that you want to win, and, more importantly, I *want* you to want to win, and similarly for you. The contest is useless to me as an indicator of who is fastest unless everyone tries to win, and that ordinarily requires that they want to win. Moreover, I want it to be the case that your losing would be a misfortune for you: since I desire that you want very badly to win, then I shall desire that your losing will constitute an important setback for you, which is to say that I want it to be a misfortune for you. And of course your losing *would* be a misfortune for you. You consider winning important since you attribute intrinsic value to being fastest, and failing to achieve something of importance to you would constitute a misfortune for you. Finally, in wanting to win I also want specifically to *defeat* your desire to win, which, we said, I want to constitute a misfortune for you. Unless extenuating factors exist, we can conclude that the steps I take toward

defeating you constitute evil. So do your steps toward my defeat.

Suppose now that we attribute intrinsic value specifically to winning a contest that is important to its participants. Winning is inseparable from defeating others, so in attributing intrinsic value to winning contests whose outcomes matter greatly to their participants, I attribute it also to defeating aims the others consider important. In such cases it is all the more obvious that my aggressive competition is prima facie evil.

But some competitions generate neither evil nor aggression. Consider ones whose participants consider winning a relatively trivial matter. A lighthearted hand of cards is an example, as are many other games, particularly ones that are not zero-sum. Winning is not important in such contexts, so losing harms no one, and wishing to defeat an opponent's desire to win is at worst a minor form of maliciousness. By the same token, such competition will not be very heated. Other games have high stakes and hence could be the occasion for aggressive competition, and even evil, as when a demonic madman forces me to play for my life.

I have said that all contests generated by the attribution of substantial importance to nonuniversalizable competitive properties will involve aggression and that some will involve evil. However, these claims do not entail that people who strongly aspire to nonuniversalizable competitive properties *must* end up aggressors. We may not act on *any* particular desire, except perhaps one that is overwhelmingly strong. But of course we *will* strive to get what we badly want unless we have a competing set of goals. Thus we may back out of an opportunity to become top pianist in the area because doing so requires the defeat of a friend who covets the title. Our concern for our friend is strong enough to curb our ambition. In general, to the extent that we have an interest in (avoiding anything detrimental to) the well-being of people in general—or, what is more likely, a certain set of people in particular—we will tend to avoid aggressing against them. Obviously a concern for morality is a complicated version of precisely this interest. Hence the moral presumption against aggression.

Even if we take a strong interest in not harming others, our nonuniversalizable competitive goals are likely to make aggressors of us because our desire to attain nonuniversalizable competitive goals are not always completely outweighed by our desire to avoid harming others. Almost all of us balance between our interest in the well-being of others on the one hand and the pursuit of our own ends on the other even if we ignore or deceive ourselves about what we are doing. We would quite rightly insist on our fair share of scarce natural resources even if it were a misfortune to certain other people (say because they cannot plan children since they cannot expect to feed them) that they do not get our share as well as theirs. And what is in the end our fair share is always elusive, partly because our interests *vis-á-vis* those of others look more important to us than they do to others. *A fortiori*, most people who find themselves in circumstances of extreme scarcity would fight to obtain at least as much food as they need to keep themselves and their families alive.

Even those who give complete priority to avoiding harm to others might well end up aggressors. Saints who would forego any benefit to themselves that would lessen the prospects of another (making saints of people with an overwhelmingly powerful concern for the welfare of others and an underwhelmingly low estimation of their own private ends) might find themselves morally obligated to aggress, as in the situation in which a life-saving drug is developed that is so scarce that access to it by some must be blocked.

Aggression and Worthwhile Lives

Given that the pursuit of nonuniversalizable competitive properties so easily produces aggression, it is unfortunate that precisely this pursuit plays a central role in the lives of many individuals. Wanting to be an entertaining novelist, profound philosopher, enchanting artist or informative historian or scientist is one thing; wishing to be an exceptional or unique novelist, artist, philosopher, historian, or scientists is quite another. That the desire for such nonuniversalizable properties is widespread was noted by Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* (I, 8), where he emphasized the prevalence of the passion for honor and for power of all sorts. Alfred Adler went so far as to say that "the striving to be superior is innate."[2] Nietzsche's emphasis on competitive properties is well known. And Abraham Maslow is famous for claiming that after our basic needs are met various "higher" desires become felt; at least many of these turn out to be desires for competitive properties,

according to Maslow's picture. Adler and Maslow thought of these as innate desires that are the root of our urge to ennoble ourselves, so that achieving "higher" goals is an innate desire of us all. While the nativist thesis is undoubtedly an exaggeration, it is clear that desires for competitive properties are considered critically important by many people. Hence it is important to notice that these seemingly noble pursuits create misery. Let us explore this fact in more detail.

More often than not, people do whatever is necessary to save their lives, however loath they are to do so, since they are still more loath to die. But just as we expect people to defend themselves, so we should expect them to go to great lengths to protect things whose importance is about as great as the value people assign their lives. Indeed, many of us will face certain death when the lives of our offspring, spouses, or close friends are in danger. The continued welfare of these loved ones is often part of what people consider to be the minimal requirements of a worthwhile life.

The minimal requirements of a worthwhile life (for a given person) are the conditions which (according to that person) must be satisfied in order for life to be at least minimally worth living, so that if the requirements are not satisfied, then living is considered no better than being dead. Desires whose satisfaction we consider requisite to a minimally worthwhile life are capable of leading us to put our lives in the most serious peril. To come between us and our attempt to satisfy them is tantamount to threatening our lives: if we find ourselves with the belief that our lives are and will remain unworthwhile (and the view that this belief will remain unshakeable), we have no reason to persist in life. Hence, the closer a goal comes to being part of what we consider to be a minimally worthwhile life, the more extreme the means we will be willing to use to achieve it. For this reason, the search by some people for a meaningful life takes on a special desperation. Such people are trying to identify what the components of a worthwhile life *would be*, something they believe they must do before they can achieve a worthwhile life.

Now notice what happens when people consider aggression-generating pursuits to be central to a worthwhile life. The pursuit of nonuniversal competitive goals involves people in activities which undermine the attempts of others to fulfill similar goals. Hence each of us is led to view the attempts of others to flourish—to fashion worthwhile lives for themselves—as an aggressive attack on us. And the importance we assign to flourishing leads us to return the aggression, even if we notice that doing so makes it more difficult or impossible for others to flourish. As long as we continue to assign central importance to nonuniversalizable competitive goals, the bitter struggle among us will remain.

War and Collective Aggression

The worst forms of violence are produced by clashes among *groups*, not individuals. When such clashes occur, we speak of war; in its primary application the term refers to violent clashes among entire groups, entire collectivities, not confrontations, however violent, among individuals. It is sometimes even said[3] that wars must involve entire nations, but I see no reason to focus on this unit. Since war certainly antedates (and is probably in some measure responsible for[4]) the emergence of the nation-state, the definition is unduly restrictive.

I cannot attempt to describe all of the reasons people go to war. However, I do want to emphasize that aggression generated by the pursuit of competitive properties plays an important role in the emergence of warfare. Just as individuals compete against others, so groups compete against others. Individuals derive a sense of worth not just from their own accomplishments but also from the accomplishments of groups with which they identify, and they can lose their sense of worth from the failures of these groups. The great importance we place on our collective accomplishments is revealed by such phenomena as the fact that a team member who played extremely well can still be crushed at the failure of the team as a whole. It is the high estimation of collective worth as opposed to individual worth that is lost by such an individual, the judged worth of *us* rather than the judged worth of *me*. But the collective worth we feel as members of groups with which we identify is as important to many of us as individual worth.

Group conflicts are especially dangerous, and not only for the simple reason that many people lend a hand in the violence. Another reason is that as a rule people who identify with a collectivity consider themselves and are considered by others as less important than the whole. Rough criteria of group

identity enable people to say that the group survives the deaths of individuals, and so the latter tend to become expendable components of the whole. This device was exploited by Hitler, who, by requiring that party members swear loyalty to *him*, ensured that he was the only group member who *wasn't* expendable.

Getting us to subordinate our own interests to those of the nation (by encouraging us to identify with the national group) is one of the thrusts of nationalism, or national patriotism. Another is getting us to subordinate the interests of other national groups to those of our own national group. The upshot is that even people who assign a great deal of weight to pursuing their own interests only in ways that do not harm others are encouraged to think that harm to those outside the nation is comparatively trivial. Limiting our concern for others to those in our group obviously makes war all the more likely by making us more unwilling to compromise.

Defeating the important aspirations of groups can therefore constitute a misfortune for the individuals who not only consider themselves part of those groups but who also judge the group's survival according to various criteria of collective identity. Hence aggression can occur on the group level, and *will* to the extent that groups value and pursue nonuniversalizable competitive properties.

Positional Goods

There is a type of goal that generates a different form of aggression than that discussed so far. Consider a goal which people *want* to achieve only if others fail to achieve it (or an appropriate indexical variant), or (to characterize the goal more usefully) a desire for an item which people value possessing only to the extent that others do not possess that item. Dress styles are clear examples, at least insofar as they are intended to make us look unusual: this purpose is defeated if the style becomes too popular with others. Prizes are another example. Such things economist Fred Hirsch has called *positional goods.*[5] He also used this term to refer to necessarily nonuniversalizable competitive properties such as status, prestige and greatness. However, the latter properties cannot be described as things we value only to the extent that others lack them. It makes no sense to ask whether we would value them if everyone possessed them since we *can* possess them only if others do not. (Compare the competitive property *equality*: it may be possessed only *if* everyone does.) Nonuniversalizable competitive properties are quite distinct from things we value only to the extent that others lack them. The distinction is so apparent that I shall use Hirsch's term *positional goods* to refer only to the latter, that is, to goods we value more to the extent that less people acquire them.[6] And for obvious reasons the term may be used to cover items we value *less* to the extent that more people acquire them.

Unlike nonuniversalizable competitive desires, then, positional goals *can* be achieved by everyone (in a group). But they are valued only if relatively few achieve them. Still, I suggest, these goals owe their positionality to more fundamental competitive desires, universalizable or not. They follow the model of styles of clothes aimed at making wearers unusual dressers; a particular style loses value when others adopt it because by adopting it people frustrate each other's (nonuniversalizable) goal of being unusual dressers. As this example shows, one reason we might desire or value something X more when we find that others have not attained it (or less when we find that they have) is that our interest in X is based on more fundamental competitive desires. Perhaps we want to find something or other (we are not particular) we can have more of than most or all other people; perhaps we want to come as close as possible to the *exclusive possession* of something or other. When X is scarce, like black coral, any of these underlying (universalizable) desires will lead us to develop an interest specifically in it; we will want to appropriate black coral when we find that it is attained by few others. On the other hand, we will lose interest in black coral to the extent that it is widespread, but we lose interest because it does not allow us to fulfill our underlying competitive desire. Everyone may be free to acquire black coral, but doing so prevents others from using it to fulfill their competitive goals.

If we *already* possess something, say the love of Hilary, or at least think we do, then the interest in the exclusive possession of Hilary's love is one of *jealousy*. On the other hand, if (we think) it is possessed by someone else, not us, then our attitude is one of *envy*. What converts an interest in X into a jealous interest in X is that besides our desire to retain X we have the desire that no one else have it. Once jealousy is added to our interest in Hilary's love, we

have a compound desire concerning it, so that losing it is no longer the only way our desire can be thwarted. Someone else's securing Hilary's love would prevent us from satisfying our compound desire. So if you no longer receive Hilary's love, your jealousy will lead you to want no one else to receive it either.

Envy is susceptible to a parallel analysis. An interest in obtaining someone else's possession *X* is converted into an envious interest when we add our desire that no one except us possess *X*. The resulting compound desire will motivate us to seek *X* out, and also to endeavor that others lose it.[7]

There is, then, little doubt that many positional desires stem from desires to approximate the exclusive possession of something; they are generated by the same interest in exclusivity as gives rise to jealousy. Indeed, I suggest that all positional goals are the result of underlying competitive desires. Moreover, a group's pursuit of the conjunctive desires that are constitutive of envy and jealousy results in straightforward aggression when the stakes are high enough: "our" pursuit of the more or less exclusive possession of *X* directly interferes with "theirs," so if the exclusive possession of *X* is of great importance to them, our acquiring it will constitute a misfortune for them.

But our attempt to fulfill positional desires will generate its *own* form of aggression as well. Earlier when we discussed aggression we spoke of acts which left victims with desires they considered very important but which they could fulfill only with enormous difficulty if at all; it was in this sort of interference that aggression was said to consist. But there is another type of interference, one that gives rise to a second form of aggression. A second sense in which someone can interfere with our attempts to satisfy a desire is to *eliminate* it, to bring about a situation in which our desire, while never satisfied, no longer exists. The most drastic way to do away with one of our desires is naturally to do away with *us*. Less drastically, I could seriously interfere with your attempt to fulfill the goals of your life plan if I brainwash or drug you so as to take away your desire to fulfill those goals. Removing desires whose satisfaction we consider profoundly important to us can constitute aggression since such losses can be misfortunes for us.

This "elimination" type of interference occurs whenever a group of people tries to acquire items which for them are positional goods. For example, as more and more members of a group acquire prestige items like Mercedes, they find that they value them less and less. Even a Mercedes cannot remain a prestige item if everyone has one. The satisfaction of positional desires by many people yields no one any satisfaction. People find that they have devoted time and energy to the acquisition of items whose value is drained away to nothing by the similar efforts of others. Of course, most people do not want to spend time in pursuits which will shortly lose all value, and it is probably typical for people not only to want to fulfill their plans but also to want not to lose the desire to fulfill their plans. To undermine the value their pursuits had, or to eliminate their motivation to achieve their plans, is thus to leave them with an unfulfilled desire. Hence a group's pursuit of positional desires can generate not only the "elimination" form of aggression, but also the "frustration" sort, involving victims with unfulfillable desires.

It might appear that we could arrange things so that the interest in positional goals need not by itself generate aggression. If people were *very* dissimilar in their ambitions, so that they always chose to work toward goals and seek out goods *other than* the ones sought by others, then competition and aggression would not result. People's pursuits would not undermine the value of the things sought by others. A similar point may seem to hold for nonuniversalizable competitive desires: if these varied from person to person in such a way that we could coordinate our pursuits so as to avoid the territory of others, then aggression would not arise. However, these solutions are unavailable, for more than one reason.

First, competitive and positionally-minded people take an interest in how the properties they seek compare to those sought by others. Some of the properties people covet are more prestigious than others, as ranked by competitive criteria such as *possessed by only the most intelligent people*. Hence they would likely react to a situation in which everyone is best in some respect by saying that being best in some respect is relatively valueless since everyone has achieved it; what is truly important is being best with respect to a property that scores high *vis-á-vis*...(fill in the blank with a competitive criterion applicable to properties). (I ignore here the fact that an insincere spirit of egalitarianism sometimes motivates competivists to (pretend to) forego evaluating competitive properties themselves; thus we hear

"It does not matter what you do so long as you do it better than anyone else," and we cannot help but wonder, "If what you do does not matter, why should it matter that you do it better than anyone else?")

Second, competitive people tend to want to have *more* (prestigious) competitive properties than most others possess. Only a few may have more of them than most other people, hence frustration aggression results. Our concern to surpass others in our total package of competitive properties also keeps us interested in securing what they have, and in preventing others from adding items to their package which do not show up in *our* package, so that even commonly distributed possessions retain some value to us. It inspires us to "keep up with the Jones," to *emulate* others, to crave what others crave, and when others accomplish some goal, to become interested in accomplishing our indexical variant of that goal. Yet this mechanism interferes with people's attempts to acquire valued positional goods by ensuring that too many people seek and thus come to possess them. Soon, as more and more people obtain the item, it loses its vulnerable positional value, forcing people to pursue some new sort of item. And so it goes; people constantly struggle to possess or achieve things that few have, and are hotly pursued by would-be emulators.

A consequence of this dynamic is that the things we value which can easily be possessed by many (commodities such as styles of clothes, for example) will tend to change over time as more people attain those things and thus undermine their value. Another consequence is that we tend to adopt ever more unreachable goals. The more unattainable the goal, the more unlikely it is that others will undermine the value of our attaining it by themselves attaining it. As well, easily attainable goals already will have been secured. Of course, certain goals can only be attained by few; this exclusiveness helps ensure that they always will be valued, that quite independently of their intrinsic features they will always hold the greatest prestige. The interest people have in things that are difficult to attain helps explain why people take up such inane pursuits as being the first person to walk across Death Valley (carrying one's own water, or while dragging boulders, or whatever).

A final point: we tend to have positional and emulative desires only against the backdrop of groups of people who take an interest (whether favorable or not) in each other's affairs: in order to emulate, there must be some group we want to emulate; to excel, there must be a group we want to exceed, and in both cases we tend to find it impossible to sustain our interest in our endeavor if the group is indifferent about it.[8] It is worth emphasizing that group members in the grip of competitive desires are *contending against* each other, rather than cooperatively pursuing a common good. Deeply ironic is the fact that the value of excelling depends on there *being* a group of people who show by emulation that they do not want to be surpassed, for in that sense the people who are competing need each other for there to be anything worth striving for, yet *what* they are striving for defeats the aspirations of the people they need. They flourish at the expense of the people who make their flourishing possible.

Against Competitivism

Two powerful sources of aggression and evil, we have seen, are the attribution of importance to and consequent pursuit of nonuniversalizable competitive properties and positional goods. Such pursuits clearly must bear some of the onus of moral impermissibility that is borne by aggression. However, it is by no means clear how this burden gets transferred, nor, indeed, when it is that aggression is wrong. And even when the issues of moral permissibility are sorted out, there remains that of whether it is a *good idea* for people to vie against each other for superiority. In what follows I shall discuss these issues and sketch thereby some of the disadvantages of letting positional and nonuniversalizable competitive values play an important part in our lives.

Let me begin, however, by dealing with an objection: anything that might be said about the disadvantages of nonuniversalizable competitive values is bound to be misleading (according to the objection) since the value of competition itself is so great. Consider for example the benefits people reap from races among scientists each of whom wishes to be the sole discoverer of the first cure for cancer (assuming someone wins). Truly, we would all benefit from a cure for cancer; competition genuinely has some beneficial results. But is competition among researchers really the most effective way to produce those beneficial results? If so, presumably it would be because competition is a more effective motivator than the alternatives: *individual* effort that is not

aimed at beating others, and *cooperative* efforts. Little empirical research is available on the effectiveness of competition as a motivator, but what little there is suggests that it is not very effective compared to individual and cooperative effort.[9] Nor is this really surprising since there are many reasons to strive for the goods that competition can make possible. Consider again the example of cancer research. Other, entirely noncompetitive reasons suffice to motivate individuals to discover a cure as speedily as possible: cancer is killing people, possibly including the researchers themselves. Moreover, a *cooperative* effort among cancer researchers has significant advantages over competition (and over individual effort). The aim of a cooperative effort is to find the cure as speedily as possible, and that calls for division of labor and sharing of resources and results. But the aim of competitors is to *win*, thus motivating them to withhold data and resources from their rivals.[10]

My quarrel (to pick up the thread) is not with all competitive desires, only necessarily nonuniversalizable ones. Elsewhere[11] I have tried to show that competitive desires in general are overrated. I will not repeat that discussion here. What still requires an explanation is why I condemn necessarily but not contingently nonuniversalizable desires even though both may generate aggression. There are two reasons. First, with a change of circumstances perfectly unobjectionable desires may be transformed into contingently nonuniversalizable ones, and we cannot possibly expect people to abandon them when the transformation occurs. Even the desire for enough food to keep body and soul together, we have seen, cannot be satisfied by everyone in every set of circumstances, yet expecting people to abandon the desire for food would be absurd. Second, while pursuing contingently nonuniversalizable desires *may* generate competition and hence aggression, it need not. Instead, we expect people to minimize their aggression out of a sense of morality, by *cooperatively* pursuing their aims. For example, if by certain cooperative arrangements more food could be produced quickly enough to keep all alive, it is possible to avoid aggression.

Compare necessarily nonuniversalizable desires such as being the best boxer. Even in serious boxing events the level of aggression may be reduced through the provision of rules of "fair play," just as rules of war (like the Geneva Convention) may reduce suffering. But war fought by the rules is still aggression, not cooperation, and so is any other contest "played" by the rules. Fighting contests by rules that limit aggression may be morally preferable to fighting them by no rules at all. Yet the aggression generated by the desire to be the best boxer can be prevented by a solution not available in the case of aggression generated by the desire for enough food: *abandon the desire*. My thesis is that all necessarily nonuniversalizable competitive desires are prima facie objectionable because they generate easily avoidable aggression. Still, my position is viable only if aggression carries a presumption against it. The nature of that presumption is complicated.

The wrong of aggression can be put as follows: it is prima facie objectionable due to the fact that it consists in acts that cause a good deal of intended or at least anticipatable misfortune for others. An act just is not aggression unless its upshot for others is dire. Moreover, aggression is the definitive case of the use of people as mere means.

Even aggression is permissible, however, in certain circumstances. The most obvious case is that in which it is the only means to avoid a much greater, catastrophic, wrong. There is a second case, I think, though a great number of readers will disagree with me on this point, and I lack the space to make a decent argument. I am inclined to say that it is permissible for people to do anything whatever to one another so long as all those affected give their fully informed consent. Others may even cause us misfortune and use us as a mere means if we give our fully informed *consent* to that treatment, say in exchange for permission to treat them likewise. Some (like Robert Nozick[12]) might not think that we *can* consent to being used since our consent is the mark of and a sufficient condition for our not being treated as mere means. But consenting to the acts of aggressors does not transform them into ones by which we are not treated as mere means. A serial killer who takes your life for kicks has used you even if you gave him permission (you were, we might suppose, on your way home to cut your own throat anyway). At any rate, if consent *were* a sufficient condition for not treating someone as a mere means, then it would be even more difficult for anyone to reject my assumption that aggression may be legitimized through consent.

On the basis of this assumption, I conclude that even contests that can be quite deadly may be mor-

ally permissible if conducted with the informed consent of all participants. Olympians scheduled for dangerous events (such as boxing matches) want the contests to occur; they do not want to lose out in them, but they prefer that to not being able to participate at all. It is, of course, extremely difficult to determine in any actual situation whether or not individuals have really given their fully informed consent to being caused misfortune. Nonetheless it is easy to imagine people who know exactly what they are doing in entering dangerous contests. None of them wants to be done a misfortune, but each is willing to exchange the requisite permission for license to treat the others likewise.

Nonetheless, consent legitimates aggression only in circumstances in which the aggression can be *contained*, so that it will not result in harm to bystanders: duels in crowded supermarkets would subject shoppers to stray bullets. The containment problem is especially dangerous when entire nations are involved.

In part, the case against the pursuit of nonuniversalizable competitive values and positional goods is that such pursuits involve us in aggression, so that the strong presumption against the latter is inherited by the former. But even if such pursuits did not generate aggression there would be a case against them. One charge is that to flourish at the expense of others, which is what those who attribute importance to seeking nonuniversalizable competitive properties propose to do, is to treat others as a mere means. A second charge might be made by John Rawls. His apparatus can be used to provide an argument against the attribution by a just society of importance to excelling and other nonuniversalizable competitive properties.[13] The parties in the original position would certainly avoid a conception of justice that attributes much importance to excelling, since they would be concerned to avoid the resulting situation in which those who do not excel are adjudged by society to be second-class citizens, which would be fatal to their sense of self-esteem, perhaps the most important primary good according to Rawls. If a just society is one in which those who excel are due more respect than those who do not, then it will be impossible for everyone to form a commitment to justice so conceived, which is tantamount to saying that there's no solution to the problem of justice, the problem of providing the terms of association for everyone in society. (Of course, the parties would have no choice but to attribute importance to excelling if it were simply a matter of psychological fact that everyone considers it important. The above argument—as well as Rawls' own defense of his difference principle—rests on the assumption that the value that is placed on excelling is socially inculcated.)

The moral objections to pursuing nonuniversalizable competitive values are not the only objections. There is also the fact that absurdities result when we consider the satisfaction of positional and nonuniversalizable competitive desires to be of great importance, or value things through the conatus of such desires. The main point is that attributing intrinsic value to excelling and its kin is to commit ourselves to the absurdity that no matter how rich our lives are in noncompetitive goods, they still lack something of great importance if the lives of others *share the same* noncompetitive goods. To say that life can be worthwhile only if we excel is worse: it is to say that no matter how rich our lives are in noncompetitive goods, they are worthless if those goods are shared by all. I elaborate on this point elsewhere, concluding that such properties contribute virtually nothing of significance to our lives.[14]

Even the positional goods that are inspired by competitive pursuits involve us in an absurdity: the collective effort to acquire positional goods requires great effort yet gets us nowhere. Each move we make toward achieving these goods helps undermine their value for others, and *vice versa*, so that the closer we each come to achieving the goods, the closer they come to being without any value at all. Practices that get us nowhere, Sisyphian tasks like running on a treadmill, are obviously inane. Far better off are those who never allow themselves to be concerned about positional goods in the first place. Not only can such people avoid the frustration just described, they can also take advantage of the tendency of competitivists to pay noncompetitivists for the privilege of status. This tendency is described in detail by Robert Frank in his engaging book *Choosing the Right Pond*.[15] The main idea is that since not everyone can acquire items if they are to retain positional value, people who get them can be expected to pay those who do not for the privilege.

Note finally that in any competition losing is not the only way to fail to win; tying is another way, and preferable by any competitor to losing. Moreover, since only the *few* may win, then among com-

petitivists the majority is likely to prefer equality to the only alternative for them, namely losing. They cannot win, but at least they may avoid losing.

So there is a sense in which egalitarianism is the majority's unstable and strained solution to the competitivists' irrational struggle to outdo each other; instead of dissolving the competition by abandoning competitive values, each agrees to be frustrated in exchange for the frustration of the others. It seems likely that the interest in egalitarianism *vis-à-vis* goods other than the liberties is based on competitivist values, so that if we rejected competitivism, we would reject all reason to embrace egalitarianism. Unless I am interested specifically in how I or my holdings (goods, wealth) stack up against others, why would I be concerned about the fact that *you* have more than I? So long as I have enough, why should it matter to me that you have *more*? I hasten to add that a rejection of competitivism does not support indifference to the plight of others. The point is that it is one thing to be concerned about others on the grounds that given the intrinsic features of their situation (e.g., the fact that they are starving) it is clear that they need help, and it is quite another to be concerned about others because of their *relative standing* to us. The latter, I suggest, is a matter of indifference. Thus while my position alleviates the concern that there are (in Hirsch's phrase) "social limits to growth," it also helps undermine the belief that justice calls for equality or for other arrangements concerning the relative standing of others.[16]

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NOTES

1. A small sample: M. Midgley, *Wickedness* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984); S. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, J. Strachey, trans. (New York: W. W. Norton Company, 1961); K. Lorenz, *On Aggression* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966); I. Eibl-Eibesfeldt, *Love and Hate* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971); A. Montagu, *The Nature of Aggression* (New York: Oxford Press, 1976); E. O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (New York: Bantam Books, 1978); and P. Kitcher, *Vaulting Ambition* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).

2. See *Superiority and Social Interest*, H. and R. Ansbacher, eds. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), p. 31.

3. R. Wasserstrom, for example, says this in his influential paper, "On the Morality of War: A Preliminary Inquiry," *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 21 (1969), pp. 1627-1656.

4. This thesis is developed by R. Carneiro in "A Theory of Origin of the State," *Science*, vol. 169 (1970), pp. 733-38.

5. In *Social Limits to Growth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 20-23, 27.

For commentary on Hirsch's views, see A. Ellis and K. Kumar (eds.), *Dilemmas of Liberal Democracies: Studies in Fred Hirsch's "Social Limits to Growth"* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1983); M. Hollis, "Positional Goods," *Philosophy and Practice*, A. Phillips Griffiths, ed., Royal Institute of Philosophy Lecture Series, No. 18 (Cambridge University Press, 1985); John Robertson, "Honour and the Good Life," unpublished Pacific APA paper, and R. Frank, *Choosing the Right Pond* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

6. I shall also use the term positional *desire* to refer to the attitude whereby we regard something as a positional good. We may add that a desire for something *X* is *positively* positional for me just in case it is coupled with the disposition to value *X* more to the extent that less people other than me acquire *X*; it is *negatively* positional for me just in case it is coupled with the disposition to value *X* less to the extent that more people other than me acquire *X*.

7. Contrast R. Nozick's approach in *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Cambridge, MA: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 239ff.

8. But see the qualifications in my "Competing for the Good Life," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 23 (1986), pp. 167-77.

9. A great deal of empirical data concerning the effectiveness of competition in an educational setting is surveyed in D. W. Johnson, G. Maruyama, R. Johnson, D. Nelson, and L. Skon, "Effects of Cooperative, Competitive, and Individualistic Goal Structures on Achievement: A Meta-Analysis," *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 89 (1981), pp. 47-62. See the engaging discussion of these data by A. Kohn in his *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986).

10. My position on competitive values appears to undergo attack by John Kekes in "What Makes Lives Good?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 48 (1988), where he claims that status and prestige are perfectly reasonable goods for us to pursue. However, I find no argument for this, aside from the obvious point that they have instrumental value.

11. In "Competing for the Good Life," *op. cit.*

12. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia, op. cit.*

13. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press, 1981).

14. In "Competing for the Good Life," *op. cit.*

15. *op. cit.*

16. I thank Frances Berenson, Curtis Brown, Herbert Fingarette, Robert Frank, Daniel Kading, Susan Luper-Foy, John Robertson and Mark Williamson for many helpful criticisms and comments. I also thank Trinity University for providing a stipend which made work on this essay possible.