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COMPETING FOR THE GOOD LIFE

Steven Luper-Foy

IT is widely believed that excelling in one or more areas of human endeavor is essential to the goodness or meaningfulness of a person's life.¹ Variants in the view are diverse: the greatness that comes from changing the course of political, scientific or cultural history is perhaps not requisite to a good life, but surely some sort of personal exceptionalness or singularity, one of the properties which I will term competitive, is necessary. Then again, maybe a competitive property is not requisite to the goodness of life, but at least we can say that having one is intrinsically valuable. Lives would be *better* by virtue of excelling or being unique in some way.

This view and its variant, which I will call Competitivism, might in turn spawn competitivist theories of justice and right. These could range from the view that social institutions and human activities are to be arranged so as to maximize the extent to which people excel (or are exceptional, etc.) to the less extreme view that excelling is one of several goods to be maximized by social arrangements.

Competitivism, though closely related to (and easily confused with) a view called Perfectionism, is best given its own name in view of an ambiguity in the term "Perfectionism." Standardly, Perfectionism holds that *excellence* is either essential to a good life or at least intrinsically good.² Because excellence can be thought of as the property we have when we excel, one type of Perfectionism is competitivist. But "excellence" sometimes means "virtue," an attribute we could have even if we do not excel or have any other competitive property; hence this second sort of Perfectionism is not competitivist.

In this paper I will argue that Competitivism should be rejected. No more will be said about competitivist theories of justice, but if Competitivism as a theory of the good is rejected, so must Competitivism as a theory of right be, since

the motivation for arranging society so as to maximize the extent to which people excel, or the like, is precisely the assumption that having competitive properties is valuable. My aim will be to show that the possession of such properties contributes nothing of any great importance to our lives: excelling and its kin should be considered neither intrinsically valuable nor essential to a good life.

I. COMPETITIVE PROPERTIES

What does it take for a horse to be a good racehorse? One plausible answer is that it must be able to outrun the average racehorse. Similarly, we might say that a good sprinter is one who can sprint faster than the average sprinter, that a good swimmer is one who can outswim the average swimmer, etc. The property of *being able to outrun the average racehorse* has a characteristic in common with *being able to outswim the average swimmer*: in order to have either, an item must compete successfully with other items of the same type. Such properties are the offspring of rivalry, and can aptly be termed "competitivist."

Further precision is possible. The capacity to outrun the average racehorse has two salient features. First, it involves a dimension or scale, in this case the dimension of running ability. A slow horse falls on one end of this dimension, a fast one on the other. Second, where along the relevant dimension an item is required to fall in order to have the property depends on where along it other items of the same type actually fall. In order to have the property at hand, e.g., a horse is required to fall farther along the dimension of running ability than other (relevant) horses. Let us say that properties which have these two features are *competitive properties* (or competitive criteria or standards). *Non-competitive* properties include roundness, redness, having a friend, etc.

This characterization of competitive properties

refers to an item's *type*. But of course an item can be described as being several different "types" of thing by varying the sortals we use to describe it. For instance, "dog" is not the only sortal under which Fido falls; there are also "animal" and "creature." This freedom is inherited when goodness is defined competitively. Depending on how we classify him, we might consider Fido good because he is an exceptional *dog* or an exceptional *animal*, etc. Given this latitude, it would be reasonable to relativize our assessments of goodness to sortals, and adopt the view that something's being a good *X* depends on its falling farther along some dimension than other *X*'s fall. E.g., Fido's being a good *dog* depends on Fido's stacking up well against other dogs. Still, it is possible to take the (less plausible) view that whether an item is a good *X* depends on where along some dimension items of a type *other* than type *X* fall. To do so is still to say that having a competitive property is essential to a thing's goodness.³

II. DISPENSING WITH COMPETITIVE PROPERTIES

For something to be a good racehorse or sprinter, it must possess capacities that are requisite to successful participation in contests like the Olympics or Kentucky Derby. The clarity of the way good runners are identified by their performance against rivals makes it tempting to understand the value of things of other sorts on the model of a contest. Extending this model to our lives leads to Competitivism. Just as a good racehorse must have the competitive property of being faster than average, the thought goes, so a good life must possess various properties to a degree that exceeds the average. Similarly, a good knife is sharper than average, a good joke is funnier than average, etc. The pattern of these cases might even suggest the makings of a general definition: a good *X* is one that has certain properties to a greater degree than the average *X*.⁴ However, I will show, the claim that competitive properties are essential to a good life is a tragic error generated by the absurd view that a worthwhile life is like a contest won.

Two unacceptable consequences follow immediately from the view that a good life must have certain properties to a degree that exceeds the aver-

age. One is that some lives are not worthwhile, no matter to *what* extent the world's inhabitants procure the properties it is rational to want in their lives, and that this cannot be otherwise. If to be good is to score *higher* than the average life, then some lives must be average or below, and hence not good. It also follows that under some circumstances *no* life will be worthwhile, no matter how splendid it is. For if all lives *tie*, then none is above average. A similarly ludicrous consequence follows from the view that having various properties to a greater degree than the average is *sufficient* for a good life: some lives can attain goodness simply by virtue of the badness of others. If everyone's life were wretched, but Elaine's were slightly less so, then her life would automatically be good.

Presumably there *are* types of thing such that not all instances of them can be valuable, such that some of them can attain goodness by virtue of the badness of others, and such that none are good if they tie. Perhaps it *is* rational to want racehorses and sprinters to be capable of running faster than average. In no possible world is each racehorse able to outrun the average racehorse in that world; hence not all of them could be good. Moreover, the badness of some racehorses would clearly enhance the value of others by making it easier to be fastest, and no racehorses would be good if they all ran equally fast.

But it is obvious that *every* instance of some types of thing could be good. Things as dissimilar as knives and human lives are examples. Suppose that being sharp enough to cut meat is what it is rational to want in a knife in view of what knives are used for. A knife will then be good if it is at least that sharp. That *other* knives are as sharp as or sharper than mine does not make my knife dull and hence does not prevent it from being sharp enough to be valuable. Nor does dulling your knives sharpen mine and hence it does not help my knife attain goodness.

Clearly, then, we can reject any general account of goodness according to which having certain features to a greater degree than the average is necessary (or sufficient) for an item to be a good *X*.⁵ And with it we can reject any analysis which entails that a worthwhile life must exceed the average. Let

us characterize as *nonuniversalizable* any competitive property such that not all items of a relevant type could have it. Because being above average is nonuniversalizable, it cannot possibly be essential to the goodness of life.

Exceeding the average is not the only nonuniversalizable property that people have linked to a good life. *Being unique in respect R*, where *R* is any particular feature, is also nonuniversalizable. Similarly, being beautiful, rich, brilliant, great, famous, and in general being singular, unusual, exceptional, excellent, or best in a given manner, are all such that not everyone could possibly acquire them. Hence none can be indispensable elements of a worthwhile life.

Of course, if it is absurd to say that everyone's leading a valuable life is inconceivable, it is just as unacceptable to say that everyone's having a *bad* life is impossible. Therefore, nonuniversalizable properties such as poverty and ugliness cannot be essential to (nor sufficient for) the badness of a life.

But some competitive properties *are* universalizable. It *is* possible for everyone to be unique in *one respect or another*, for example. We could not all attain uniqueness by originating the theory of relativity, but each of us could develop at least one idea. Why not take the universalizable property of being unique in one respect or another as a necessary ingredient of a worthwhile life, and then insist that inventing an idea enhances the value of my life by making it unique in some way?

There are further reasons why some properties cannot be essential to goodness, over and above the fact that they yield one of the two elitist absurdities I discussed. Consider the supposition that a life is good only if it possesses some unique-making feature. If everyone on Earth had some characteristic possessed by no other earthling, could we conclude that all of Earth's inhabitants have the uniqueness essential to a worthwhile life? No, for at the other end of the universe might be a planet called Twin Earth which is qualitatively identical to Earth.⁶ Corresponding to the single individual on Earth who developed the theory of relativity is a co-discoverer on Twin Earth. So no earthling secured uniqueness by originating that theory after all. In this fashion Twin Earth tends to undermine

the uniqueness of everyone on both planets. But the mere existence of that planet cannot have the result that no one, whether earthling or twinearthling, has a good life. Hence uniqueness cannot be an indispensable aspect of a worthwhile life.

Related cases show that we can have good lives without possessing other competitive properties, such as being *exceptional* in some respect. I may be exceptional when compared to others on Earth, but suppose that out there is a planet called Ultra Earth whose inhabitants are far more sophisticated than those on Earth. Clearly the mere fact that this planet of exceptionals exists cannot have the consequence that no valuable life is led on Earth.

The above arguments went a bit too fast, however. The existence of Twin Earth and Ultra Earth does tend to undermine the uniqueness and exceptionalness of earthlings, but if we choose our properties carefully it need not. Some properties others cannot possibly duplicate, such as Fred's property of being Fred, or *being this very person*. Why not say that having such properties is essential to a good life?

But these are trivial features indeed since we are inevitably unique in these ways. Moreover, while having such properties may well be essential to a worthwhile life simply because we must have them in order to have a *life*, they do not help make a life *good*: leading a good life clearly is not something we can do solely by staying alive.

There are still other ways of being unique or exceptional that are not undermined by the existence of Twin Earth and Ultra Earth. Consider the property of having some feature or other that no other person *on Earth* has. Thus if I introduce an idea to Earthly minds, I am unique among earthlings, and the fact that someone introduces my idea to Twinearthly minds does not rob me of my uniqueness-among-earthlings.

Requiring us to have such a property would narrow down the set of people with whom we must compete in order to have a worthwhile life. It is only with those who are in some sense within our community that we must compete. Let us characterize as *non-community bound* any competitive property such that whether or not an item of a relevant type has it depends on where things outside of that item's community fall along the relevant

dimension. The Twin Earth and Ultra Earth cases show that non-community bound properties are inessential, but is there any reason to avoid saying that community bound properties (such as uniqueness-among-earthlings) are?

So much now depends on the nature of the community that is relevant to the assessment of our lives. It cannot, e.g., be the set of earthlings, since it may be by virtue of some heretofore undiscovered group of earthlings living in Doubleland that no one on Earth is unique in some way. If earthlings formed the community from the point of view of which lives are to be assessed, then the existence of Doubleland would rob earthlings' lives of goodness. Yet to retract a favorable assessment of our lives when doublelanders are discovered would be ludicrous.

How then can we characterize the relevant community? Suppose we say that the community which is appropriate for the assessment of my life consists of those persons with whom I decide to *compete*. Thus if I am to endorse my life because of my creativity, then I had better out-create those I want to challenge. This characterization cannot be satisfactory, however; it allows me to handpick my own competition. I will inevitably win a contest the participants in which I have invited only after ensuring my superiority; so what could possibly be the point of vying with such a line-up in the first place?

To enlarge the relevant community to include everyone who *values* the property I am striving to attain helps loosen my control over the contest. Whether or not I have a worthwhile life depends on what is happening in the marketplace: different features will be coveted by people to various degrees, so that the intensity of competition for those properties will vary. In order to have a good life, according to the present suggestion, I must find a feature for which I can successfully compete given my skills, determination, and the intensity with which it is craved by others. Unfortunately, to enlarge the relevant community in this way reintroduces the problem of unwelcome competitors such as the twinearthlings and the doublelanders.

In the final analysis, I submit, what we are after when we seek competitive properties is the approval, appreciation or respect of people whose

favorable opinion, we believe, would benefit us. Twinearthlings and even those in remote countries are, we see, in no position to benefit us. Potential spouses *can* benefit us; if they make themselves available only on a competitive basis, as so many do, then it is in our interest to secure whatever competitive property it is that they demand by competing against all those who our prospective mates take to be in the running. The community we have been trying to identify can now be delineated. It is those against which we are ranked by those whose opinion we take to affect us positively or negatively.

If this answer is correct, however, then having competitive properties is not intrinsically good, much less essential to a good life. We want such properties only because they are instrumental in bringing us the esteem of others which, in turn, is something we may regard either as an intrinsic good or an instrumental good or both. That competitive properties are not intrinsic goods is a point to which I will return later. For now it is enough to observe that having the favorable opinion of others can be a non-competitive property. Of course, it would be *competitive* if all approval were a matter of ranking people according to competitive criteria. But in important cases approval is a matter of judging that people have various noncompetitive properties that we consider *valuable*. It is of the first importance that a person be moral, for example, and being moral is a noncompetitive property.

So long as there are people whose approval of us is not contingent on our meeting competitive criteria, we can attain the main aim people have in pursuing these standards without competing. To stipulate that a good life requires the possession of some competitive property is then unjustified, subject to the counterexample of someone living a worthwhile life significantly through being immersed in a group of persons whose respect does not hinge on such standards. I conclude that competitive properties cannot be essential to the goodness of life (nor can their absence be essential to the badness of life).

If these features are indeed dispensable, then one type of competitivist account of value cannot be correct. Let us use the term *Extreme Competitivism* to refer to the doctrine that lives must have competi-

tive properties in order to be good or meaningful. This version of Competitivism, we have shown, must be rejected.

An example of Extreme Competitivism is a view held by Nietzsche. Ignoring interpretive difficulties, Nietzsche thought that the only good lives were those lived by the "highest specimens." The rest of us must necessarily lead unworthy lives, and settle for whatever value comes of helping the "highest specimens" rise.

So far I have discussed only the extreme form of Competitivism. I now extend my critique to other forms.

III. HIGHER-LEVEL COMPETITIVE PROPERTIES

One reaction to my argument against Extreme Competitivism is this: "If people were equally cruel and if every physical object were orange (say), then it would be largely pointless to talk about cruelty and orangeness. Some sort of competitive criteria are at work in fixing the meanings of these and other terms, simply because one of language's functions is to enable us to make comparisons among things. Similarly, there would be no point in saying that a life is good by virtue of some feature if everyone's life had that feature. It is true that we must avoid building these competitive criteria into the meanings of the terms. But why not say that a property *counts* as a criterion of the goodness of knives or lives by virtue of being possessed by items which *do* meet given competitive criteria? Why not say, e.g., that sharpness of degree *n*, a universalizable property, is the criterion a valuable knife must meet simply because *n* is the degree of sharpness possessed by the average knife?"

Let us use the term *Higher-level Competitivism* to designate this view that a feature counts as a criterion of goodness for items of type *X* by virtue of being possessed by an *X* which meets given competitive standards. I want to argue that Higher-level Competitivism is open to objections similar to those we have considered. Aristotle adopted this type of Competitivism; I will use his view to illustrate the problems I have in mind.

Aristotle thought that the good life for human beings is determined by our *function*. Our "func-

tion," according to Aristotle, means that activity which we are constructed to perform and which no other type of creature performs (as well as we do).⁸ Our good, in turn, is the efficient performance of the activity by virtue of which we are unique.⁹ To identify our good, then, we need only determine what this unique-making activity is. On the standard reading of Aristotle, it is reasoning, so that our good is efficient reasoning.

Aristotle offered an interesting account of the life of reasoning; whether it is a plausible picture of a good life is not something I will discuss, however. Instead, I want to criticize his conception of what can *count* as our good. Not least among the problems it faces is the fact that there *is* no activity that fits Aristotle's description of our function. But the crucial difficulty, I suggest, is the claim that in order for some feature to count as that by virtue of which our lives are valuable, it must be unique to human beings. We must have the following competitive property: *being the only species with a member who has that feature*. Hence what it *takes* to make my life valuable would be different if on a distant planet there exist nonhuman creatures capable of reason. Reason not being unique to us, our good would then consist in performing some *other* activity, one that *is* unique to us. That there *is* no such activity would be a calamity. On the Aristotelian view, if there were no activity of which we alone are capable, then it would be impossible for us to have worthwhile lives. However, it is absurd to say that what counts as the good life for people—and whether *anything* can count—depends on our having some property that is unique to our species.

Consider another version of Higher-level Competitivism. Suppose we say that in order for a feature to be that by virtue of which an *X* is good, that feature must be possessed by an *X* which has some property to a greater degree than the average *X*. Like the Aristotelian view, this version of Higher-level Competitivism is subject to criticisms similar to the ones given against Extreme Competitivism.

The view at hand entails that a good student is one with a feature possessed by students who test better than average students, a valuable life is one with a feature possessed by lives that are better than average, etc. But why say that good-making

features fit into this scheme? During which historical epoch is the average life selected? Why say it should be during the present sent rather than the distant future or even the remote past? Are twinearthlings, ultraearthlings, and Doublelanders reckoned with when the average life is determined? As for the average of all actual lives whether past, present, or future, on Earth or elsewhere, why should we suppose that the features of such lives provide plausible standards for the goodness of lives? Such an average life would be extremely bad if the run of lives has tended to be bad, or good if the run of lives has been good. There is no reason to suppose that items which are above average along some dimension supply the features which are constitutive of goodness.

Similar considerations will show the unreasonableness of expecting items that meet other competitive criteria to supply essential good-making features. I conclude that Higher-level Competitivism must be rejected.

IV. MODERATE COMPETITIVISM

I have abandoned two sorts of Competitivism: Extreme and Higher-level. At this time I will discuss a final sort, namely, the view that a life's having certain competitive properties is intrinsically valuable. Call this view *Moderate Competitivism*. I will argue that having competitive properties is not valued by people for its own sake, but rather because it is useful toward other goals.¹⁰ Then I will suggest that we should attribute a great deal less importance to these properties than we typically do.

Frequently we misrepresent ourselves when we express a desire to fulfill competitive standards, and close scrutiny will reveal that our real concern is elsewhere. Thus even if I represent myself as having the modest wish to be at least slightly above average in my swimming ability, my actual aim is simply to be able to save myself and others in various sorts of likely emergencies, to be able to engage in amusing aquatic activities, etc. Certainly I am not really interested in nonuniversalizable or non-community bound criteria: the capacity to swim I may well desire, but why would I also want the ability to outscore twinearthlings, ultraearth-

lings and doublelanders? Nor am I really out to compete against any substantial community. The average swimmers of any substantial group, for all I know, may be people who have just gotten beyond terror at the prospect of being in water, so that being above average does not meet my needs. On the other hand, average swimmers could be people who can swim several miles, a good deal farther than I need to be able to swim. A more accurate description of my desire can be expressed in non-competitive terms: I want to be able to swim well enough to save myself and others in likely emergencies, etc. Expressing my goal in this way reveals that I am not out to acquire competitive properties after all.

Although competition is frequently irrelevant given the aims we have behind our professed interest in competition, it is not always. Many of us find ourselves in societies set up so that various scarce items that are desired by many are available only to those who successfully compete for them. An example is a desirable occupation which, given a competitive market, we cannot enter unless we convince others that we are the most qualified among those in the running. Certainly we may find that our lives would be best if we adopted a particular occupation for which we must compete and hence it will be rational for us to be the best candidate available. Nevertheless it is important to keep such desires in perspective. There are *reasons* why we want to attain that occupation, and it is only because *these* are important to us that it is crucial for us to be the best competitor. Hence the unimportance of what happens on Twin Earth or even in a different job market. Being the best job candidate has a purely instrumental value.

Many of us also live in societies in which people esteem, befriend, and even love us only if we prevail in various sorts of competition. Because of our intense desire for the approval of certain people, therefore, many situations will exist in which it is rational for us to outdo others in amassing features that people are in the market for. Once again, however, it is crucial to see that while excelling can be valuable in social conditions like ours, its value is its instrumental role in providing us with goods such as those esteem brings.

There are actually two senses in which competi-

tive properties fail to be intrinsically good because there are two senses of "intrinsic good." On the one hand, just as an item might be valuable for a specific individual (i.e., a *personal good*), so it might be *intrinsically* valuable for an individual: it is noninstrumentally good for some person, i.e., an *intrinsic personal good*. Having competitive properties, we have seen, fails to be intrinsically valuable in this sense. On the other hand, just as something could be valuable for everyone (i.e., a *universal good*), so it might be a *universal intrinsic good*: it is noninstrumentally valuable for virtually *everyone*. But if competitive properties are not intrinsic personal goods, then they cannot be intrinsic universal goods.¹¹

I have admitted that given our social conditions it tends to be rational to seek out competitive properties as the means to the attainment of goods such as esteem. However, this is not to endorse those conditions themselves. Social arrangements which urge us to outdo others in packing our lives with features that are in demand in the marketplace can do us serious harm, as can be seen once it is clear that there is little or no relationship between the characteristics of a good life and the features of lives which are in great demand.

Consider one of these harmful effects. Now, it is a commonplace that when the supply of some sort of person increases, people's assessments of that sort of person tend to become less favorable. Market tensions, which reflect people's preferences, tend to be against homogeneity. Even people's assessments of qualities such as health, happiness, and morality will decrease when the supply of healthy, happy and moral people increases. Yet these qualities certainly play a role in a good life; hence market pressures may well lead us to devalue qualities that clearly are part of a good life. Moreover, as homogeneity among people increases, other, less common features acquire an artificially great significance as people cast about for ways to discriminate among themselves. Thus wealthiness, Olympic-class athletic ability, and desperate peculiarities of the sort championed by the *Guinness Book of World Records* take on unnaturally great importance.

Another pernicious effect of designing our lives as suggested by the marketplace is that we scarcely

can resist the pressure to *specialize* in order to become the sort of person who is in demand. To excel at something requires an inordinate amount of attention to one limited area, and the neglect of equally important concerns. For example, the training schedule required to be the best swimmer would impose an inordinate sacrifice on one's education and social life. Skewing our activities toward one goal would lead us to neglect other projects and the needs of our spouses, children and friends.

To whatever extent possible, therefore, we should insulate ourselves from the vagaries of social opinion. Because of our dependence on other people, this might be difficult, particularly if we find ourselves in the society of people who esteem others only on competitive grounds. But perhaps we can associate with more enlightened people. Just as it is best for us to judge our own lives by asking whether they have various *noncompetitive* features, so our love and esteem needs are ideally fulfilled through relationships with people who value us on noncompetitive grounds.

Still, one might insist that the rejection of Competitivism is a formula for extreme mediocrity. I certainly have tried to show the pointlessness of finding ways to be better than other people. If mediocrity consists in failing to be exceptional, then a mediocre life is none the worse for it. Yet nothing I have said inveighs against attempting to live life fully, stretching one's resources to attain a complex and interesting life. If avoiding mediocrity amounts to this, rather than the attempt to outdo others, it surely counts as a good. Indeed, construed in this way, avoiding mediocrity (arguably) will be the best way to live one's life inasmuch as the complexities, pleasures and depth of one's life are greatest thereby.

Nor have I any complaint against Individualism—suitably understood. Construed one way, Individualists are people who consider it intrinsically valuable that their activities, attitudes, and features be determined by themselves rather than by others. Such nonconformists should eschew the attempt to meet competitive criteria. To judge oneself according to how well one does compared to others is not individualistic by these lights—particularly when one uses *their* standards. Construed in a cruder way, Individualists are people who con-

sider it intrinsically valuable to be unlike others. These *anticonformists* find it valuable to have a competitive property, a view we should avoid. Just as objectionable is the conformist view that it is intrinsically valuable to be *like* others. Nonconformists would reject both of these views since to try to be different from, or similar to others is to allow *their* attitudes and features to determine *ours*.

V. ASSOCIATIONAL UNITS

To think that a worthwhile life is like a contest in which we prevail over other people has many unattractive consequences, we have seen; some of these are tragic, such as the fact that this model leads us to take the attitude that *my* leading a good life might contribute negatively toward your doing so.¹² In fact, however, a good life is of an entirely different nature. I suggest that a crucial element of such a life—indeed, a universal intrinsic good—is being in a certain sort of relationship with others, one that *contributes* to the value of the lives of those involved.

It is a psychological fact about us that we need association. The sort of relationship that enables us to fulfill this need is friendship. Friends are united in activities they find mutually rewarding. But although these undertakings play a crucial role in the friendship, they are not its point. The point is to participate in a situation in which (to mention some of its elements) one takes pleasure in the following:

- (1) an activity;
- (2) the fact that one is engaged in that activity with another individual (that *particular* person, not just anyone); and
- (3) the fact that this second individual enjoys:
 - (a) the activity, and
 - (b) the fact that she or he is engaged in it with oneself.

It is also possible that friends will take pleasure on even higher levels. One might, for example, delight in the fact that a friend is pleased that one enjoys an activity. More reflective and self-conscious friends will derive pleasure on especially high levels. Let us call an arrangement which exemplifies (1)-(3) an *associational unit*. Two or

more people are friends just in case they form an associational unit.¹³

Whether there is an activity around which such a unit can be built depends on the people at hand—on their areas of overlapping interests and needs. Sexual partnerships, which are especially vivid examples of associational units,¹⁴ show just how complex these units can be. It is clearly important to seek people with whom we can build associational units and to find activities capable of giving substance to these affiliations. Into them we should incorporate as many of our activities as possible. We will generally feel alienated from undertakings which escape integration.

Friendships are reciprocal relationships. In fulfilling my need for association by uniting with you in mutually rewarding activities, I *help* you to fulfill your need. My attaining a competitive property, by contrast, can tend to prevent you from doing the same. To desire friendship, then, is not to wish for a competitive property.

Fulfilling needs for things other than association is made possible by associational units. Everyone has the need for a secure sense of self respect. Many find it possible only if they have the esteem of certain people. But not just anyone's approval and respect is important to us. To master the approval of someone we disrespect would not support our sense of self esteem. Only the respect of someone whose opinion we consider to be informed and insightful would. Hence the urgency of forming attachments which secure us the respect and approval of people whom we respect and esteem. Of course, the same holds for those whose approval we hope to gain: that they respect us is a prerequisite for their valuing our esteem. Affiliations involving reciprocated respect, then, are stable, unlike ones involving onesided respect. For many, a crucial element of a good life is to be in one or more stable relationships of reciprocated esteem.

Love is another critical need. Our relationships are stable, however, only when our live is reciprocated. One reason for this is that to love people often involves having especially great esteem for them, and relationships in which we gain such respect are stable only when we reciprocate it. More importantly, relationships involving reciprocated love are associational units in which the pleasure

friends take in one another is especially great. If one friend derives considerably less enjoyment, so that their *returns* are unequal, so will their demands be; consequently activities become difficult to coordinate. Associations involving reciprocated love are crucial elements of a worthwhile life.

It is worth emphasizing that *relationships* are perhaps the most significant element of a good life. The specification of a person's good in terms of a certain sort of life plan tends to focus our attention only on the fulfillment of our desires, as if their fulfillment were all there is to a worthwhile life. This feature John Rawls' view¹⁵ shares with versions of utilitarianism which analyze goodness as desire satisfaction.

Relationships among ourselves and others are not a component of the good life merely in the derivative sense of being the object of an actual desire. Even if I sincerely profess a strong preference to avoid associating with others, I nonetheless

could not have a worthwhile life without friends—so long as I have typically human needs. For friends are needed by us all regardless of whether that need will ever be reflected in our conscious desires. Fulfilling needs, in turn, is part of what constitutes happiness, which itself is fundamental to a worthwhile life.¹⁶

To think that desire satisfaction is the sole or primary element of a meaningful life, while relationships play a role only insofar as they are the objects of desires is to get matters exactly backwards. A remarkable amount of the content of our desires and plans can be explained in terms of what is required for the persistence of associational units. That people tend to form such attachments is a deep principle of human motivation. Typically, the fulfillment of a desire plays a role in a good life precisely *because* it helps to perpetuate and give substance to our relationships with others.¹⁷

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NOTES

1. I use the terms "good life," "worthwhile life," and "meaningful life" interchangeably because a meaningful life is best analyzed as a worthwhile life, which in turn is best understood as a fully good life (one worthy in both moral and non-moral senses). In doing so, I do not mean to deny the existence of a sense of "good" according to which a life is good so long as it is morally worthy—even if filled with despair and misery.

2. This account of Perfectionism is presupposed by the analysis of Perfectionist theories of justice offered by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), Section 50.

3. All competitive properties are extrinsic, but not vice versa. Hence my claim that competitive properties are inessential to the goodness of life does not entail that extrinsic properties are inessential.

4. Among those who have advocated this view are John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice, op. cit.* Chapter VII, especially p. 399; W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), p. 67; and Kurt Baier, "The Meaning of Life," in S. Sanders and D. Cheney, (eds.), *The Meaning of Life: Questions, Answers and Analysis*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980), pp. 47-63. According to Ross,

'Good of its kind'...is comparative. We have in mind...a rough average of the excellence of the members of the kind, and we call anything better than this good and anything worse than it bad... 'Good' in this usage means 'better than the average' or perhaps 'considerably better than the average,' and 'bad' 'worse than the average' or 'considerably worse than the average.'

Following Ross, Rawls offers the following pair of definitions:

(1) *A* is a good *X* if and only if *A* has the properties (to a higher degree than the average or standard *X*) which it is rational [for most people] to want in an *X*....

(2) *A* is a good *X* for *K* (where *K* is some person) if and only if *A* has the properties which it is rational for *K* to want in an *X*....

Baier, on the other hand, claims that

when we determine the merit of students, bulls, or bathing belles, we do so on the basis of some standard or norm. ...A good and worthwhile life is one that is well above average. A bad one is one well below.

5. Similar considerations show the implausibility of Rawls' unfortunate definition of a good person (or a person of moral worth)

as one who has to a higher degree than the average person certain features of moral character, namely, those features that it is rational for the persons in the original position to want in one another (*op. cit.*, p. 437). This definition has the result that in order to be a good person, I must outdo everyone else on moral dimensions and thereby contribute to a situation in which they fail to be good persons. To avoid this problem Rawls might say that a good person is someone who has the features of moral character which it is rational for the persons in the original position to want in one another and *to the degree* it is rational for them to want those features in each other.

6. This Twin Earth example is borrowed from Hilary Putnam, "The Meaning of Meaning," in K. Gunderson, (ed.), *Language, Mind and Knowledge, Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. VII (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975).

7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations: Third Essay—Schopenhauer as Educator*, section 6, and "What is Noble?" *Beyond Good and Evil*, Part 9.

8. *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, Chapter 7 (see especially 1097b22 ff).

9. Aristotle could be interpreted as defining our good as performing our unique-making activity better than most others do. In that case he would be an Extreme Competitivist as well.

10. A short argument can be used to show that non-community bound properties are not intrinsically good.

An item's being intrinsically good entails that a situation in which that item exists is better than one in which it does not, given that in all other relevant respects the situation is the same. This test is useless for many types of item since it is not clear when "in all other relevant respects the situation is the same." But it is clear enough for the purpose of evaluating non-community bound properties.) Given this criterion, it is easy to see that non-community bound properties cannot be intrinsically good. Take the property of being unique in at least one respect. The mere fact that Twin Earth exists would rob everyone of this property, and yet clearly no one would be any worse off if Twin Earth existed.

11. Of course, I have not shown that there *could* not be people for whom fulfilling competitivist aims is noninstrumentally good. Nor do I wish to argue this. However, though such people are conceivable, the normal state of affairs is for us to find it rational to pursue competitivist aims only as means toward other, non-competitivist aims.

12. Rawls discusses one nonuniversalizable property, namely wealthiness (Section 82 of *Theory of Justice*, *op. cit.*). He points out that a just society would discourage people from giving significant weight to the attainment of wealthiness since not all can be wealthy and since the attempt to be wealthy tends to prevent people from attaining the good of social union.

13. The notion of an associational unit is not to be confused with Rawls' notion of a social union (see *Theory of Justice*, *op. cit.*, Chapter 79). People form a social union when they share an end and consider its fulfillment to be intrinsically good. Clearly a social union need not be an associational unit: you and I can share an end we consider intrinsically valuable even though neither takes pleasure in the other's contribution to its fulfillment. Thus enemies drawn together in a temporary struggle for survival form a social union but not an associational unit. Social unions do not require that people care about (being with) each other—only that they care about some *end* with which others can help.

14. Compare Thomas Nagel's discussion of sexuality in "Sexual Perversion," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 66, (1969), pp. 5-17.

15. *A Theory of Justice*, *op. cit.*

16. Recent work by Bernard Williams can lend itself to this confusion over the centrality of desires ("Persons, Character and Morality," in *The Identities of Persons*, ed. by Amelie Rorty, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 197-217). He terms "categorical" any desire that is not contingent on whether its bearer is alive. My present desire that some situation *X* be the case at a given time *t* is contingent, and hence not categorical, according to Williams, just in case the following condition holds: If I (now) believed that I will *not* be alive at *t*, then I would (now) be indifferent about whether *X* is the case at *t*. Williams claims that categorical desires propel us forward into the future, for in order to satisfy them we must remain alive. If, with Williams, we see ourselves as missiles propelled into the future by the conatus of desire, we might be tempted to say that it is in being driven forward by categorical desires that a worthwhile life consists; after all, so long as we have categorical desires, the prospect of suicide will not arise. Our avoiding suicide, in turn, could be construed as involving the belief that our life is worthwhile.

However, it is possible to be driven forward by desires that, even if fulfilled, would play no role in the meaningfulness or goodness of life. It is remarkable how much energy people spend in attempts to excel. (Their desperation is chronicled in the *Guinness Book of World Records*.) And I hardly need mention that people are notorious for working enthusiastically toward goals that, once attained, prove hollow and unfulfilling.

It is worth mentioning, incidentally, that categorical desires are not necessarily capable of propelling us into the future. Suppose I have the second-order desire to go on tomorrow only if my most cherished desires have a chance of being fulfilled. This desire has not propelling force since it is satisfied if I die. And coupled with categorical desires, it will dispell their driving

force if I believe that I just cannot satisfy them. The decision to suicide will be all the more likely if I have intense categorical desires I cannot fulfill. (Moreover, my desire that the sun rise tomorrow may well be categorical, but since nothing I do with my life affects whether the sun will rise, then my desire is incapable of propelling me into the future.)

Because categorical desires are not always capable of urging us forward, their explanatory value has an important limitation. Perhaps everyone with a worthwhile life *does* have these categorical desires, but that fact does not explain why such persons persist in life. What matters most is the *content* of those desires, and the likelihood that they will be fulfilling.

17. I wish to thank Herbert Fingarette, Susann Luper-Foy and Mark Williamson for useful comments on an earlier draft. A brief version of this essay will be read at the 1986 meeting of the American Society for Value Inquiry, held in conjunction with the American Philosophical Association.