

Introduction

“War is the father of all things,” Heraclitus wrote around the year 500 BC. With statements like these, the Greek philosopher developed a reputation among many interpreters as an obscure or “difficult” thinker – as someone free of illusions who primarily saw life as characterized by disharmony. He thus stands remarkably apart from most other ancient philosophers, who tended to emphasize the eternal values, the unity of being, the persistent sameness, the unity in diversity, and timeless divinity. Heraclitus, in contrast, is concerned with variability and change.

The English translation of the Greek “*polemos*” as “war” is in fact too narrow. One should rather speak of conflict or rivalry – or competition. There is a connection to another well-known saying from Heraclitus, “*panta rhei*”: “everything flows.” The world is constantly subject to change, and competition is one of the principle mechanisms that produce such change.

Competition is the primary concern of this book. More specifically, the following discussion sets out to examine competition from an *ethical* viewpoint. My larger goal here is not to weigh the ethical implications of competition. I neither seek to determine whether the benefits

of competition outweigh its disadvantages or to make any conclusions about what is permissible in a competitive context and what isn't (although I will touch on both of these subjects *en passant*). My aim is rather to systematically work out and recognize the ethical benefits of competition – not in its combative or belligerent aspect, but rather as a civil mechanism that has made many of the achievements of civilization possible.

Some might ask: Is this really an ethical benefit – making achievements of civilization possible? I would respond by asking what – in the eyes of those critics themselves – actually would constitute an ethical benefit. Is this something purely abstract, like a change in motivation, a “shift of consciousness”? I doubt that even the most ardent critics would hold this view both in theory and practice. It is hard to imagine that ethicists, at least those who are at all interested in the world's affairs, would explicitly and systematically deny that the broad achievements of civilization, the scientific and technological advances for sustainable development, or the successes in combating hunger and poverty around the globe during the last decades are advances in terms of ethics proper. They are not merely economic successes in terms of higher income or gross domestic product. They are successes which have helped billions of people around the world to live better, healthier, and (in many ways) less poor lives. And competition is key in making this possible.

As this book will show, many critics of the market economy, of capitalism, economics, and economization are not, upon closer inspection, fundamentally opposed to competition. Some openly admit this, such as Bertrand Russell (see Chapter 2) or British trade minister Vince Cable who said at the congress of the British Liberal Democrats in 2010 that capitalism kills competition wherever it can.¹ As I will show, the same applies for many other critics: They may hold intense tirades against commodification and commercialism, against the “economic horror” (Forrester 1999), or against the dictates of the market, but a second look, or rereading, shows that they do not generally reject competition as such. To the contrary, they recognize (if within certain limits) its necessity.

This premise is the underlying thread that runs throughout this book. Chapter 1, therefore, necessarily begins by more precisely defining the term and the concept, while distinguishing it from related terms. A closer look will also be taken at the use of the term competition in different cultures and in different eras. Ample room will be set aside for the critics of competition.

Chapter 2 explains why competition is a fertile and welcome concept from an ethical standpoint. Here I draw on examples from philosophy but also economics.

Chapter 3 summarizes in more detail the primary thought behind the rejection of concepts of competition: zero-sum thinking. I trace

this thinking throughout the Bible, history, and philosophy. Zero-sum thinking is systematically opposed to an ethical revaluation of competition. I propose that competition in all its guises has a tremendously positive impact on issues of ethics, and that we should abandon our zero-sum thinking hostility towards it. Consequently, I also address cultural differences in attitudes towards competition and cite recent experimental findings.

The four chapters that follow aim to apply the basic ideas to individual areas.

In Chapter 4, the discussion focuses on how increased competition in ecology does not in fact harm the environment, but can bring about ethical improvements.

Chapter 5 deals with the effects of competition in the education sector. That said, I already want to emphasize at this point that I am not interested in arguing that competition in all respects and in every form is expedient or ethically valuable. On the contrary, it should become apparent in this chapter that it very much depends on the actors we allow to compete and in what way. Competition is never simply a given – it needs to be organized.

Chapter 6 is dedicated to a topic that has been at the forefront of debate for many years, namely the question of whether increased competition in the fields of healthcare and nursing can lead to improvements. This is my own view and I will explain why I hold it. But here, too, it is important

that the conditions for competition in the health sector are properly set.

Chapter 7 discusses the application of the core ideas in the political sphere: Even here, there is room for making improvements through competition, which need not be spurned with ethical arguments. In this chapter, it will become clear that ethics should not be a one-way street with only prohibitive signposts, wherein behavior is generally discouraged or thwarted. Ethics can and should also open up new possibilities.

Finally, Chapter 8 looks at the way in which we deal with ideas of competition in the private sphere – or decide precisely not to. For instance, board games like Monopoly are often suspected of being overly competition-oriented and thus harmful. My concern here is with the mechanisms anchored in our everyday thinking that lead us to repeatedly reject competition and other economic processes, and which, as a consequence, also negatively affect us. In this regard, I agree with many traditional ethicists: Ethics should not only deal with the big questions of politics and society, but also with small, individual, and everyday issues. But in doing so, it should serve not only to curb behavior, but also, at least occasionally, to animate it.

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