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Competitive Value, Noncompetitive Value, and Life's Meaning

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Abstract This paper explores the notions of competitive and noncompetitive value and examines how they both affect meaning in life. The paper distinguishes, among other things, between engaging with competitive value and participating in a competition; between competitive value and comparative value; between competing with others and competing with oneself; and between subjective and objective aspects of both competitive and noncompetitive value. Since any competitive value is also comparative value, the paper criticizes Harry Frankfurt's claim that comparative value is just a 'formal characteristic of the relationship between two items', from which nothing follows about their value or desirability. The paper also argues that, overall, noncompetitive value has the advantage overcompetitive value in terms of attaining meaning in life. Reasons for this claim include that: competitive value relates less than noncompetitive value to what is meaningful in life; competitive value is harder to attain than noncompetitive value; competitive value depends more than noncompetitive value on luck and on what other people do; and competitive value is more likely to lead to stress, hypocrisy, and aggression.

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1. Introduction

Competitive value is the positive or negative value related to winning or losing in a competition. It involves one's own or others' positive evaluation of one's winning against others (or negative evaluation of being defeated) in the area being competed in. For the winner, competitive value often produces ego gratification, admiration by others, and increased social status. For the loser, competitive value often produces ego dismay, lack of admiration by others, and sometimes decreased social status. To have competitive value, a thing must be at least somewhat rare or inaccessible; other-wise, there is no competition. For example, in musical chairs, there is no competition if the number of chairs is equal to or larger than the number of children and everyone can find a seat. For a competition, there must be not only winners, but also losers: only some can attain what is being competed for. Some leave the competition as some-what superior to others, while those others leave the competition as somewhat inferior, in the aspect of life being competed in.

Noncompetitive value is the value of what can be had or attained with no relation to competitive value. To clarify the distinction, consider two examples.[1]

[1] The next four paragraphs draw on Landau 2017: 43–48.

Philosopher
Muriel is a philosopher who values philosophy highly. She likes thinking and reading about philosophical issues and talking philosophy with friends and colleagues. It is an important aspect of her life's meaning. Having worked in philosophy for some years, Muriel can tell herself that she knows philosophy better than most people in her hometown. When she strolls along one of its streets, she is aware that she probably knows more philosophy than the average person, probably even than any other person, on that street at that time. Now suppose, as a thought experiment, that a hand comes down from heaven and touches everyone's foreheads, so that now they all know as much philosophy as Muriel does. The extent to which she would now value philosophy less is the extent to which philosophy has competitive value for her. This is the extent to which she finds philosophy valuable because she can tell herself, even if only secretly or subconsciously, things like 'Ha! *I* know *so* much philosophy—while *others* don't!' The extent to which Muriel *continues* to value philosophy under these new circumstances is the extent to which the value of philosophy for her is noncompetitive.

Pianist
Arthur values the fact that he plays the piano very well, much better than anyone else in his social circle, that is, the people with whom he usually interacts. At a certain point, someone who plays the piano better than he does joins his circle. Arthur finds that he now values playing the piano less. Perhaps he does not even want to continue to play at all anymore, even for himself. The degree to which the value of playing the piano has decreased for Arthur is the degree to which it was previously of competitive rather than noncompetitive value to him. His 'winning' against others in playing the piano, the social status that playing the piano better than others in his circle gave him, and the ego gratification of being able to secretly tell himself that he is better (at least in this sphere) than others around him are now gone. The extent to which Arthur continues to value feeling as one with the music, expressing himself emotionally, the beauty of the music, its depth, its evocative power, etc. constitutes the noncompetitive value of playing the piano for him.

There are many instances of high competitive value but low noncompetitive value, such as coming first in a hot dog eating contest. There isn't much noncompetitive value in stuffing oneself with hot dogs. But winning such a contest has some competitive value. Diamonds are not prettier than sparkling glass. However, owning diamonds has a much higher competitive value than owning sparkling glass, because diamonds are much rarer, thus allowing their owners to win some social or psychological contest, telling themselves that they own diamonds *while others do not*. If everyone else also had diamonds, or could easily obtain them, diamonds' competitive value would sink. In economic contexts, competitive value has much to do with what Thorstein Veblen (1994) calls *conspicuous consumption*, that is, buying goods or services in higher quantity, quality, or price than actually 'needed' in order to confirm to oneself and to others one's higher economic (and social) status and victory over others.

There are also many instances of low competitive but high noncompetitive value. Parents of babies may value very highly the close, warm relationships they have with their babies, without minding at all that other parents also have such close, warm relations with their own babies. Listening to good music may be of high value in many people's lives although this is not unique to them and its value to them has nothing to do with their winning against anyone in this area. Good friends are often not those who are hardest to befriend or to stay friends with, and if we are not the only ones who have good friends, but many other people do as well, we usually do not mind. (Whatever part of us does mind that is the part that is informed by competitive value.)

There are also cases in which both noncompetitive and competitive value are low, such as watching bad TV shows, or in which both noncompetitive value and competitive value are high, such as being the first to discover a vaccine for an epidemic or giving more charity than others to a good cause in order to demonstrate to oneself or others one's greater kindness and higher economic status. Competitive and noncompetitive value can also change in different directions: the noncompetitive value of one's philosophizing might decrease, because one's philosophizing ability deteriorates, while its competitive value increases, because the philosophizing ability of other people deteriorates even more.

In this paper, I examine how competitive and noncompetitive value relate to life's meaning.[2] Section 2 explores the notions of competitive and noncompetitive value. Section 3 discusses the advantages and disadvantages of competitive value relative to noncompetitive value for life's meaning. Section 4 argues that since competitive value is less advantageous overall than noncompetitive value in terms of meaning in life, we may wish, in some instances, to prefer the latter.

2. Preliminaries

Engagement with competitive value should be distinguished from participation in a competition. People may participate in and try to win a competition just for the sake of some necessary noncompetitive value (for example, a needed job, scarce food), without engaging with competitive value. In such cases, winning has purely instrumental value for them in terms of attaining the noncompetitive value they require. They do not care about being victorious in itself: as long as they obtain the job or food they need they would be just as glad if others obtained similar jobs or food. One engages with competitive value only to the extent that one is motivated, even implicitly, by the wish to be victorious as an end in itself. (Of course, people can compete while engaging simultaneously with both competitive and noncompetitive value, in varying proportions.)

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[2] I hold here, with many others, e.g., Wolf (2010: 13–33), Kauppinen (2012: 353–56, 361–67), and Metz (2013: 220–39), that life's meaning is primarily constituted by value. Hence, competitive and noncompetitive value are relevant to it. However, some, e.g., Goldman (2018: 116–51), Repp (2018), Seachris (2019), and Thomas (2019) hold that life's meaning is primarily constituted by intelligibility rather than by value (although Seachris, more than Goldman, Repp and Thomas, recognizes that value, too, is important, moreover includes the recognition of value as part of what impacts intelligibility). For arguments questioning the intelligibility view and defending the value view, see Metz 2019: 409–11, and Landau 2021.

Competitive value should also be distinguished from comparative value. All competitive value is comparative value, but not vice versa. One can compare without competing, as when one compares the beauty of one's lawn to that of one's neighbours without competing because one doesn't care much about lawns and their beauty. But one can also compare without competing about what one does care about and would like to improve in. For example, one can run in the park every morning and value this ability, compare one's running with that of others and notice that some are faster—even wish one were as fast as some others, moreover try to be as fast as they are—yet still not compete. Just as people sometimes compare themselves to someone better or worse than themselves without feeling either envy or haughtiness, so too can they compare themselves to others without feeling victorious or defeated. The more one focuses, when comparing, on reaching a higher degree of noncompetitive value rather than on winning against a rival or feeling victorious, the more one compares noncompetitively. When comparing noncompetitively, if others lose value, bringing them down to one's own level, one is not pleased, as one would be when engaging with competitive value. In competitive comparisons, the noncompetitive value achieved is a vehicle for one-upmanship, while noncompetitive comparisons focus—even if comparatively—on noncompetitive value as the end. Competitive comparisons have to do with feeling gratification or humiliation at having one's status enhanced or lowered in some real or conceived hierarchy. Noncompetitive comparisons, on the other hand, engage with the value of what is had without being concerned with one's hierarchical value vis-à-vis others. Thus, a person who does not pursue competitive value need not avoid comparisons. It is important to note this because comparisons allow us to identify and classify value (for example, evaluating a short story as good often involves comparing it to other short stories). Completely avoiding comparisons would impoverish our evaluative outlook. But since one can also compare while engaging with noncompetitive value, refraining from engaging with competitive value need not lead to avoiding comparisons.[3]

A person's life is more engaged with competitive value the more aspects of their life they interpret as having to do with winning or losing against others; the higher the percentage of their time they spend in trying to achieve or maintain competitive value; the more they crave and rejoice in winning and the more they hate and are frustrated by losing; the more they are ready to invest in and sacrifice for winning; and the less they recognize noncompetitive value as a good, available, alternative source of value and meaning in their life. It is easy for people to fail to notice the degree to which they engage with competitive value. Muriel and Arthur described above might well be surprised to notice how much less they value their philosophizing and playing once circumstances change. This lack of clarity has various sources. People are often moved by both competitive and noncompetitive value at the same time and with respect to the same things. Many competitions are not formal, announced, or even conscious. People can compete against others who are themselves not competing, as when someone competes with their neighbours over whose lawn is the nicest even while the neighbours neither know nor care about the competition. Some people also engage with competitive value against others who no longer exist, competitively comparing their own achievements to those of long-dead athletes, scholars, or friends.[4] And many feel embarrassed about the centrality of competitive value in their

[3] I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing me to clarify this point.

[4] Owens (2022: 125) distinguishes between institutionalized competitions (e.g., debating contests), in which rules about permitted actions and what constitutes

lives and thus often try to ignore it or deny it to themselves. To discern the actual competitive and noncompetitive value in their lives, they will often need to employ thought experiments such as those outlined above, in which they become less victorious because what they have attained becomes more common or because others improve. Arthur, for example, might ask himself how much less valuable he would find his piano playing if many others in his circle started playing as well as (or better than) he does.

People sometimes compete with themselves, which can be interpreted as trying to win against one's earlier self or another aspect of one's present self. Some self-competitions focus on noncompetitive value and are best interpreted as just efforts toward self-improvement, in which one is glad to have developed rather than to have been victorious. Other self-competitions also engage with competitive value and indeed involve pleasure at being victorious. But in self-competitions, engagement with competitive value is generally lower than in competitions against others, because in self-competitions one is both the winner and the loser and because victories, being internal, do not provide enhanced social status or feelings of superiority over others.

Competitive value can have a great deal to do with luck. We would ascribe competitive value to Neil Armstrong's being the first person to walk on the moon even if we learned that another person had initially been chosen to do so but happened to catch the flu two days before take-off. We would ascribe competitive value to the first person to find a vaccine for an illness or the winner in a sports competition even if we knew that the competitors were as good (or better), and the victory was determined by small lucky or unlucky incidents. At times, we may accept what might be called 'competitive value luck' even more than we do moral luck (Williams 1981): in cases where competitive value has to do with something like natural beauty or absolute pitch, it is determined almost purely by luck. Admittedly, however, if two people reach the same high result, we tend to ascribe more competitive value to the one who has done so through expertise and effort than to the one who has done so through sheer luck. We may also want to distinguish between different fields, more easily accepting the impact of luck on competitive value in backgammon, say, than we do in science.

Both competitive and noncompetitive value have 'objective' as well as 'subjective' aspects. Competitive value can have to do with one's actual winning of a golf competition and the resulting enhancement in one's social status, which are events that occur in the world, but can also have to do with ego gratification because of one's perceived victory and perceived enhancement in social status. Noncompetitive value may have to do, for example, with the lives one actually saves or the environmental harm one prevents, but also with sensations of warm friendship, aesthetic enjoyment, self-acceptance, and plain happiness. Subjective competitive value relates to that part of the self that is busy with conceiving oneself as better or worse than others, while subjective noncompetitive value relates to other aspects of the self that we value. The 'objective' and 'subjective' aspects of competitive value, like those of noncompetitive value, need not coincide. In competitive value, one might, for example, experience

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winning are explicit, and less institutionalized competitions (e.g., the race to the North Pole), in which rules about permitted actions and what constitutes winning are less explicit. I suggest that the spectrum of competitive value, and perhaps competitions, is broader and also includes cases in which rules are nebulous, ad-hoc, unconscious, or even barely present, as when one compares oneself competitively to a person who was more beautiful but is now dead.

ego gratification because one wrongly conceives oneself as having won or fail to experience ego gratification because one wrongly conceives oneself as not having won. Likewise, for noncompetitive value, one might feel contentment because one wrongly believes that one did not participate in causing some environmental harm, or one might fail to sense such contentment because one wrongly believes that one did participate in causing that harm.

The distinction between competitive value and noncompetitive value cuts across the distinction between achievements and non-achievements.[5] Some of what is of competitive value (for example, most cases of successful scientific research) also has what Bradford (2015: 12–26) identifies as the characteristics of achievements: it involves activities, is attained (at least in part) through people's own efforts, is difficult, and includes processes that are executed competently to cause products. But competitive value can also have to do with human qualities (for example, one's great natural beauty, one's absolute pitch) that don't involve any of the characteristics above.[6] Likewise, some of what is of noncompetitive value is an achievement (for example, through persistent practice, becoming able to play the piano well and with pleasure), while some isn't (for example, good, effortless friendships).

The distinction between competitive and noncompetitive value also cuts across the distinction between telic and atelic activities (Setiya 2017: 133–60). Telic activities (for example, solving a mathematical puzzle or succeeding in building a house) are geared toward completed achievements. Once the achievement is completed, the meaning in overcoming the challenge and attaining the achievement quickly dissipates. Atelic activities (for example, spending time with friends or taking a walk for the sake of the walk rather than in order to get somewhere) are not geared toward completed achievements and aren't as amenable to the dissipation of meaning as telic activities are. One can complete building a house while gaining either competitive or noncompetitive value (when one doesn't care how one's house 'scores' relative to others). One can also take a walk in nature without caring about competitive value or while caring about it ('unlike those couch potatoes, I walk in nature'). If I am correct that both competitive and noncompetitive value can enhance life's meaning (see below), then since both telic and atelic activities can involve competitive and noncompetitive value, Setiya's (2017: 133–35) claim that meaning dissipates from telic activities seems in some cases incorrect. Further, completed achievements with high competitive value (for example, being the best student in one's year in college; getting a gold medal in the Olympics; receiving the Nobel Prize) may be counterexamples to the view that meaning dissipates from completed achievements aimed for by telic activities.

Competitive and noncompetitive value interrelate in a variety of ways. In some cases, enhancing one of them diminishes the other, as when people choose to motivate themselves by focusing on one of them rather than the other. But they can also enhance each other. Competitive value sometimes produces noncompetitive value, as in the case mentioned above of giving more charity to a good cause than others do in

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[5] I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing me to clarify this issue.

[6] There are also further differences between what is of competitive value and achievements. For example, according to Bradford (2015: 4, 171–72), failures can be seen as achievements. But failures usually don't bestow competitive value. The products of achievements cannot be the result of too much good luck (Bradford 2015: 64, 133). Yet, as was argued above, luck can play an important role in competitive value.

order to demonstrate one's economic status, or in the case of gold and diamonds: since people are ready to pay a great deal to attain competitive value, gold and diamonds also have noncompetitive financial value, and some people keep them only, or also, for that value. Likewise, noncompetitive value can produce competitive value, as when one helps others out of benevolence but finds, with time, that doing so a lot has led others to admire one as the most generous person in the community. (Over time, this status can become more important than it was to begin with and more important than the noncompetitive value engaged with initially.) But not all competitive and noncompetitive value produce each other. Winning a hot dog eating competition, for example, may yield no noncompetitive value (for example, financial prize). And one can do a great deal of good without thereby gaining any improvement to one's reputation.

Competitive value is often not gradational: one either wins or loses. This is how it is, for example, in many games and sports tournaments and when competing for most scholarships, prizes, promotions, deals, and jobs. But competitive value can also come in degrees. Especially when competing in an informal setting and when winning has to do with a variety of factors, as in a context like social status in high school, competitive value can be gradational; except for those at the very top or very bottom of the social ladder, everyone competing for status wins against some and loses against others, thus positioning themselves on a continuum of competitive value. Sometimes people also impose non-gradational competitive value on gradational competitive value, for example when noticing that they are not in the top ten percent of students in their class and deciding that they are therefore failures.

People can invest competitive value in absolutely anything that is somewhat rare. However, they often do so selectively. Some choose (not always consciously) to engage with competitive value only when they are likely to win, occasionally even initiating such competitions and then looking for others who are less likely to win to join them, thus setting themselves up to win. But people also often join, sometimes thoughtlessly, competitions in which they are almost certain to lose. There are various reasons for this. Competitive value is often stimulating. Especially at the beginning, the mental images of how one might attain competitive value are enticing. For some people, participating in competitions, in games or otherwise, is the only way to remain in a social circle and thus avoid loneliness. Avoiding a competition can sometimes be interpreted (by both others and oneself) as indicating inaptitude or fear, so that those who do not participate are occasionally evaluated as negatively as they would have been if they had participated but performed badly—or even more negatively ('what's the matter, you're afraid?').[7] Thus, people sometimes unreflectingly and uncritically join competitions that are not beneficial for them.

Most people are unaware not only of the extent to which they engage with competitive and noncompetitive value in different spheres of their lives but also of the ways in which competitive and noncompetitive value impact their lives' meaning. In what follows, I explore many of these ways and compare the advantages and disadvantages of competitive and noncompetitive value as vehicles for life's meaning. I will suggest that, overall, noncompetitive value has the advantage over competitive value in terms of attaining meaning in life.[8]

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[7] This is in some disagreement with Owens (2022: 140), who holds that competitions, or games, are voluntary (although, for some caveats, see Owens 2022: 140: n. 27).

[8] Following Nozick (1981: 595, 610–11), Raz (2001: 10–40), Cottingham (2003: 21–31), Wolf (2010: 13–33), and May (2015: 50–59), I base my discussion on a hybridist

3. Advantages and Disadvantages of Competitive and Noncompetitive Value for Life's Meaning

3.1 Constituting Life's Meaning

It might be claimed that life's meaning is constituted by noncompetitive rather than by competitive value. What makes life meaningful is noncompetitive value such as moral behaviour, wisdom, or artistic creativity, not competitive value that has to do with winning. According to this view, competitive value may instrumentally enhance life's meaning by creating an incentive to work hard and produce higher noncompetitive value that, in turn, constitutes life's meaning (see below). But what is meaningful in life is noncompetitive rather than competitive value. This is a disadvantage of competitive value relative to noncompetitive value.

However, we are also likely to consider some kinds of competitive value to make (or be part of what makes) life meaningful.[9] Many take Neil Armstrong's being the first person to walk on the moon, a scholar being the best historian of their generation, or a student's being the best in that year at college to confer meaning on their lives beyond that conferred by the noncompetitive value of walking on the moon, being an excellent historian, or being a superb student. If another astronaut had already walked on the moon ten years before Armstrong did, or if Armstrong had been only one out of fifty astronauts who started walking on the moon at the same time, we would take Armstrong's achievement to confer less meaning on his life. Thus, it seems that although in many cases what we take to be meaningful has to do with noncompetitive rather than competitive value, there are also cases in which what we take to be meaningful has to do with competitive value. (These cases typically also involve high noncompetitive value.)

This suggestion conflicts with Harry Frankfurt's (1997: 5–8) view that we should *not* attribute value to things or achievements because of the way they are positioned in comparison with others. Frankfurt holds that comparative value is a 'formal characteristic of the relationship between two items' from which 'nothing whatsoever follows as to the desirability or the value of either. Surely what is of genuine moral concern is not formal but substantive' (1997: 6). But if competitive value, which is a type of comparative value, sometimes does add value and meaning to life beyond the (positive) noncompetitive value involved, then either formal characteristics of the relationship between two items can be relevant to their desirability or value, or some types of competitive comparative value are not only formal but also substantive.

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conception of meaning in life, according to which a meaningful life has to fulfil both objective and subjective conditions. For one's life to be meaningful, it has to include aspects of sufficient objective value, but one also has to care about these aspects or see them as meaningful: "meaning in life arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness" (Wolf 2010: 26). For differing, subjectivist views of life's meaning, see, e.g., Taylor (1981: 148–49), Frankfurt (1988: 80– 94), and Trisel (2002: 79). For differing, objectivist views on life's meaning, see, e.g., Metz (2013: 182–84), Smuts (2018: 75–99), and Bramble (2015). However, much of what I say below under hybridism also holds under objectivism.

[9] I am grateful to Thaddeus Metz for pressing me to see this point.

3.2 Necessary and Sufficient Condition for Meaning in Life

Once the hybridist subjective attraction condition is fulfilled,[10] we would consider a life that is empty of competitive value but that has high noncompetitive value (for example, in such spheres as morality, knowledge, or parenting) to be meaningful. But even if the hybridist subjective attraction condition is fulfilled, we would not consider a life that is empty of noncompetitive value but that has high competitive value (for example, full of victories in hot dog eating contests) to be meaningful. Once the hybridist subjective attraction condition is fulfilled, then, competitive value emerges as neither sufficient nor necessary for having a meaningful life, while noncompetitive value emerges as both sufficient and necessary for having a meaningful life. Competitive value seems to be just a contributing factor for life's meaning, even if sometimes an important one. This can be seen as a disadvantage of competitive value relative to noncompetitive value with regards to life's meaning.

3.3 Motivating People to Be and Do Their Best

As mentioned earlier, the urge to win against others (or at least not to be defeated by them) can be a strong motivator to try hard, so that when what is competed for is meaningful, competitive value may enhance life's meaning. Noncompetitive value also has a motivating force since it, too, is a kind of value, and value often attracts. But it seems that, for many, the motivating force of noncompetitive value is weaker than that of competitive value, so that competitive value has an advantage over noncompetitive value in this respect.

However, there are also many cases in which competitive value dissuades people from actions that would have enhanced their lives' meaning. As with Arthur, mentioned above, some people who fail to win in certain spheres of value then completely forsake those spheres, thus losing significant noncompetitive value that could well have enhanced their lives' meaning. Noncompetitive value, which calls on us to engage with some things not in order to win but because what is engaged with is valuable, avoids this disadvantage. There are also cases in which competitive value pushes people too hard, creating anxiety and overexertion that undermine the achievement of the noncompetitive value that would otherwise have enhanced meaning. Noncompetitive value, which usually creates less alarm and anxiety, is less prone to this disadvantage as well.

3.4 Self-esteem

Lack of self-esteem leads people to feel inadequate and to lack the self-confidence needed for pursuing what is meaningful. Attaining competitive value can lead to increased self-esteem that offsets such feelings of insufficiency. It may be that attaining competitive value can enhance self-esteem better than attaining noncompetitive value, which is less focused on one's ego.

However, although people who attain competitive value often experience increased self-esteem, those who do not succeed in attaining it often experience a loss of self-esteem, which may diminish their motivation to enhance their life's meaning and thus their success in that. Because noncompetitive value involves one's ego to a lesser degree than competitive value does, failing to attain noncompetitive value may not lead to such destructive outcomes for life's meaning.

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[10] See footnote 8.

3.5 Enjoyment

Many enjoy competitions in the form of sports tournaments and games, both as participants and as spectators. Some report that they also enjoy real-life competitions, as when they compete against others for a job, a promotion, or a deal (although I have heard this more often from those who won these competitions than from those who lost them). Of course, enjoyment differs from meaning in life (see, for example, Wolf 2010: 2–7; Benatar 2017: 65–66). A life full of enjoyment can be quite meaningless, while a life of painful sacrifice for a noble cause may be highly meaningful. Nevertheless, for many people, suffering beyond a certain degree wears away the motivation, energy, and presence of mind needed for actions toward meaningful ends. Enjoying oneself through competitive activity can balance out some suffering and its negative consequences for life's meaning. Many people seem to enjoy themselves less with noncompetitive activity than they do with competitive activity.

However, although trying to attain competitive value is enjoyable for many, for many others competitive value comes with frustration, tension, and anger at oneself and at others.[11] (Involvement in competitive value merely as a spectator carries significantly less risk of this disadvantage.) Thus, just as trying to attain noncompetitive value does not generate some of the enjoyment that trying to attain competitive value generates, it also does not generate as much frustration and suffering as trying to attain competitive value does.

3.6 Strengthening Group Cohesion

By fostering competition between groups, the search for competitive value can consolidate group cohesion and community spirit. This can increase subjective caring for meaningful group projects as well as enhance efficient teamwork toward these projects, thus augmenting life's meaning. Pursuing noncompetitive value without a sense of competition against another group, even if done jointly with other people, may lead to lower degrees of group cohesion and thus of the positive consequences of that cohesion for life's meaning.

However, competition between groups can also enhance hostility toward the other groups, which may lead to immoral behaviours that diminish life's meaning. When competitive value is endorsed *within* groups, it can undermine friendships and caring for the group's shared meaningful goals as well as efficient teamwork, sometimes even leading people to rivalry and sabotaging each other's work.[12] The elevation of competitive value within groups may also enhance phenomena such as hypocrisy, alienation, cheating, stealing, and aggression. All of these, of course, diminish life's

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[11] This is in disagreement with Owens's (2022: 130) view that 'to treat an activity as a competition is to enjoy the contest, is to revel in the rivalry that it involves'.

[12] Hussain (2020), who focuses on competition in the sphere of political and institutional morality, also emphasizes that competitions can enhance estrangement and rivalry that undermine solidarity (e.g., 88, 96, 109). However, Hussain emphasizes institutional rules leading to strategic actions that enhance rivalry (84). I suggest that focusing on competitive rather than noncompetitive value often enhances rivalry and undermines community solidarity even when no strategic actions are involved. Likewise, Hussain focuses on associations in which 'members are seriously constrained in terms of their liberty to exit or dissolve the association' (85, 113). But I suggest that focusing on competitive value often also undermines group solidarity even in cases where members are at liberty to exit or dissolve the association.

meaning and seem to be less likely to result when groups or individuals pursue noncompetitive value.

3.7 Desire, Goal Directedness, and Excitement

Competitive value often has to do with desiring or caring about goals, which relate for hybridists to having meaning in life. Competitive value often also has to do with excitement, intensity, and dedication, which help people avoid indifference—one of the experiences that, following hybridist accounts—undermines life's meaning. As mentioned above, noncompetitive value, too, has an attracting force. But it seems, again, that for many people noncompetitive value is less exciting, intense, arresting of one's attention, etc., than competitive value.

3.8 All or Nothing

In the cases in which competitive value is non-gradational (so that one either completely succeeds or completely fails to attain it), achievements may differ only slightly in their noncompetitive value but completely in their competitive value. Two scholarly achievements may be of almost the same noncompetitive value, but because only one prize is given, the scholarly achievement that has only just slightly higher noncompetitive value gets all of the competitive value, while the other gets nothing. This may seem implausible and disproportionate, making competitive value a disadvantageous source or component of life's meaning.

Of course, there are also cases in which noncompetitive value is conceived in a non-gradational manner, as when one decides, for example, that one is just entirely stupid or entirely smart (although when such judgments are passed, some competitive value often lurks in the background). However, while many cases of noncompetitive value are open to being seen as either gradational or non-gradational, many cases of competitive value are formally non-gradational and are not open to gradational thinking. In many sports and in many parts of the professional and business world, competitive value is conceptualized as having to do with either winners or losers—complete successes or complete failures.

3.9 Likelihood of Being Achieved

As mentioned above, competitive value is usually enjoyed only by some: the winners. Often, the fewer who can win, the higher the competitive value. In other words, the higher the competitive value, the greater the chances that one will fail to attain it. Hence, for many people, focusing on competitive value, especially high competitive value, will be an unhelpful and even destructive way to pursue meaning in life. A life focused on (high) competitive value is more likely to be conceived as meaningless. Indeed, quite a few people I know consider their lives not to be meaningful because they failed to attain some competitive value and by being overly focused on competitive value, they are insufficiently open to the ways in which noncompetitive value can make life meaningful.

3.10 Being Dependent on One's Own Actions, Deserved, and Reliable

Attaining or failing to attain competitive value depends to a significant degree on what *other* people do, since others' good or bad performance, no less than one's own, determines the competition's result. Likewise, as mentioned above, in competitions, especially close ones, people often attain or fail to attain competitive value because of luck. Thus, attaining meaning in life through competitive value is often less dependent

on one's own actions, less deserved, and less reliable than is attaining meaning in life through noncompetitive value.

3.11 Unwise Judgment and Uncritical Endorsement of Norms

Since competitive value is often exciting and has an enticing power that is difficult to resist, it can attract people to engage in activities that decrease meaning in their lives (as in 'who drives faster to the frat party' or 'who consumes more alcohol without passing out' contests), more so than noncompetitive value does. Competitive value may also move people to desire things and see them as good just because they are competed for, as well as to endorse the norms related to those things just because they are competed for, without critically considering their value. Of course, people can also endorse bad noncompetitive value without sufficient critical consideration. But competitive value seems to cloud one's judgment more because of its higher captivating or exciting power.

3.12 Neglecting Other Aspects of Meaning in Life

Because competitive value may strongly arrest one's attention and be emotionally impactful, it sometimes leads people to focus only on it while neglecting other aspects of their lives' meaning (for example, family; enjoyment of art or natural beauty). People sometimes even sacrifice important aspects of their lives' meaning that they already possess in order to attain higher competitive value. Since noncompetitive value often arrests one's attention less and has a lower enticing power, it is less prone to this disadvantage.

4. Balancing Competitive and Noncompetitive Value

The considerations presented in the previous section do not suggest that competitive value is never helpful for life's meaning.[13] The advantages and disadvantages presented above are only tendencies that may or may not appear, and it is hard to tell how strong or prevalent they would be in different circumstances. For example, many cases of competitive value do not lead to cheating or aggression. There may also be circumstances in which the disadvantages of competitive value (such as its leading to cheating or aggression) will be overridden, when they are present to a lesser degree, by the advantages of competitive value, such as producing strong motivation to achieve a noncompetitive value that in turn leads to an overall increase in life's meaning. Note also that the disadvantages of competitive value do not emerge as strongly, or at all, when it is low (as, for example, when one is playing chess or backgammon with friends). It is when competitive value is high that its disadvantages are more likely to emerge. Furthermore, it is not only trying to attain competitive value, but also trying to attain noncompetitive value, that may encourage cheating or aggression (for example, when seeking a job or food, without reference to competitive value).

Thus, my arguments are not intended as a crusade against competitive value. Rather than commending or condemning the pursuit of competitive value in general as helpful for life's meaning, we should try to identify the circumstances and the degrees to which pursuing competitive value would be a helpful choice, finding the optimal

[13] Compare Hussain (2020: 81) who, in the sphere of political morality, although generally very critical of competitions, holds that they may be good in the right degrees and circumstances.

balances of competitive and noncompetitive value for enhancing meaning in life. This optimal balance will differ not only according to circumstances but also between individuals, since some tend to become more hostile or insincere than others when engaged with competitive value, some need competitive value more than others as a motivational force to engage in what is meaningful, etc.

Having said that, I think that the considerations presented above suggest that striving for competitive value requires more caution since it is, overall, a more problematic source or aspect of life's meaning than noncompetitive value is.[14] Although competitive value has an advantage over noncompetitive value in the categories of enjoyment; desire; goal-directedness; and excitement, it has disadvantages relative to noncompetitive value in the categories of reliability; deservedness; being in one's own control; likelihood of being achieved; being an all-or-nothing issue; neglecting aspects of life's meaning; enhancing hypocrisy, cheating, stealing, and aggression; and causing one to fall into unwise judgment and the uncritical endorsement of norms. Competitive value is also, overall, less relevant than noncompetitive value to much of what we take to be meaningful in life. Admittedly, competitive value seems to be more impactful than noncompetitive value when it comes to motivating people to be and do their best, group cohesion, and self-esteem. But competitive value is more impactful than noncompetitive value in these spheres not only positively but also negatively (that is, it can lead to both group cohesion and group fragmentation, to both self-esteem and self-contempt).

Furthermore, we should distinguish between increasing meaningfulness and decreasing meaninglessness. Noncompetitive value has an advantage over competitive value when it comes to increasing meaningfulness, but even more so when it comes to decreasing meaninglessness. The lower likelihood of attaining competitive value, its tendency toward all-or-nothingness, its unreliability, and its possible negative impact on self-esteem, wise judgment, and wise endorsement of norms, among other categories, may be dangerous or downright destructive for those who struggle with life's meaninglessness. For many people, including those whose lives are generally meaningful, meaning in life is fragile and, in some cases, volatile. The move from the effort to increase or maintain meaningfulness to the effort to decrease or avoid meaninglessness may be abrupt. Indeed, many people I know who take their lives to be insufficiently meaningful seem to be overly engaged with competitive value and insufficiently engaged with and sensitive to noncompetitive value. It seems that meaning in their lives could greatly increase if they were to diminish the centrality of competitive value to their lives, which leaves them largely blind to the abundance of noncompetitive value available all around them. They do not notice the value in the beauty, knowledge, love, friendship, etc. that are widely accessible to them because these are not coupled with sufficiently high competitive value. Trisel (2002: 71) presents the analogy to Olympic long-distance runners who, once it is clear that the gold, silver, or bronze medals will not be theirs, see no further reason to continue running. They do continue to run because it is 'good form' and everyone is watching but feel their running to be futile. If receiving the medals is the only thing that interests them, then continuing to run is indeed pointless once it is clear that they will not receive the medals.

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[14] This is also Hussain's (2020) general appraisal of competitions in the sphere of political morality. Owens (2022: 125–28) seems to have a more favourable view of competitions, perhaps because he mostly discusses competitions in games and does not relate his discussion to meaning in life.

Owens (2022: 125, 128) points out that competition is ubiquitous. I think that, at least for most people, some degree of competitive value is also ineradicable. Even some of those who work hard to completely eradicate competitive value from their lives discover that they in fact still engage with it by feeling victorious over all those others who have made less progress in the effort to completely eradicate competitive value from their lives. But as suggested above, complete eradication of competitive value, even if it were possible, would not enhance life's meaning. What is needed, instead, is the appropriate balancing of competitive and noncompetitive value, which, I suggest, will in many people's lives require less focus on the former and more on the latter.

But can people even choose to change the balance of competitive and noncompetitive value in their lives?[15] I have seen small but significant changes happen too often and for too many people to doubt that, at least in a significant percentage of cases, this possibility exists. It should also be remembered that small changes in emphasis in various aspects of life are sometimes all that is needed to balance out unbalanced tendencies and to correct excesses. Just as people can notice that they are too critical, gullible, career-oriented, aggressive, submissive, etc., and then change their attitudes and behaviours to a helpful degree, so too can they often notice and change their excessive (or insufficient) pursuit of competitive or noncompetitive value to a helpful degree. Doing so may involve personal reflection, value clarification, dialogue with family and friends, counselling, and efforts to notice what have become automatic emotional and behavioural reactions. The balance between competitive and noncompetitive value should also be relevant, of course, to educators such as teachers and parents and to those who contribute to cultural values who can influence attitudes toward competitive and noncompetitive value.

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[15] I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

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