

What Happens to People in a Competitive Society

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What Happens
to People
in a Competitive
Society

An Anthropological Investigation of Competition

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PREFACE

Why write a book about competition and anthropology? Quite simply, because there are scarcely any books of this kind published on the topic—a striking fact. Competition is something that we take for granted. It is a well-established and widespread process in our society, and it is mostly viewed in a positive light. It promotes efficiency and performance. It has significant entertainment value, especially in sport. The primary spheres of competition appear to be in the economy and in sport, but competition also exists in the world of education and politics, as well as in the family sphere and on a purely individual level.

It is precisely the apparent naturalness of the idea of competition that calls out for a more critical investigation. There are good reasons to ask questions here, especially about the anthropology that is presupposed by the idea of competition and about the consequences it entails for human beings. What does competition mean for my relationship with myself, my neighbor, nature, and God too? Does competition mean that I use my neighbor merely as a means to achieve my own ends? Is there space for a truly human life in the context of competition?

Economic competition offers an entry point into the discussion of the relationship between competition and anthropology. This is not a matter of chance: today, economic competition dictates the conditions of a great deal of the competition that takes place in our society, including what happens in sport, culture, and education. In this way, economic goals influence how people think about themselves and about the world in which they live. The deepest intention of this book is to investigate in

some measure, and to evaluate, the values with which we as a society and as individuals deal, and the values that we wish to make our priorities in the competitive society we live in.

This book is a revised and translated edition of a book originally published in Norwegian in 2008. In addition to the revision needed when the reading audience changes, and new literature is published, I have deleted some original text and added some new, especially in Chapters 1, 5 and 8. I have dealt more extensively with method, with important economists and taken more into account the question of human dignity in its relation to competition. In this way the book's argument is more profiled.

For the realization of the two editions of this book I am indebted to my employer, the MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society, my colleagues and the librarians at MF. MF gave me leave for research and also contributed financially to the translation of the book. My thanks also go to my wife, Else Marit Løberg, being an excellent pathologist and scientist, but not of the competitive type! To her this book is dedicated.

Oslo, Norway

Svein Olaf Thorbjørnsen

CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
	<i>Competition in Society</i>	1
	<i>The Problem to Be Studied and the Goal of Our Investigation</i>	7
	<i>Competition—Clarifying the Definitions</i>	11
	<i>Anthropology—What Does This Mean?</i>	17
	<i>Material</i>	20
	<i>Methodology</i>	22
	<i>References</i>	29

Part I The Phenomenon of Competition

2	The Phenomenon of Competition: Social Anthropological Perspectives	35
	<i>Introduction</i>	35
	<i>Collaboration and Competition</i>	36
	<i>The Understanding of History and Competition</i>	38
	<i>The Structure of Society and Competition</i>	39
	<i>The Economic System and Competition</i>	41
	<i>Equality, Inequality, and Competition</i>	46
	<i>The Individual, the Group, and Competition</i>	50
	<i>Self-Confidence, Status, and Competition</i>	51
	<i>References</i>	55

3	The Phenomenon of Competition: General and Contemporary Perspectives	59
	<i>Introduction</i>	59
	<i>Competition—A Natural Phenomenon?</i>	60
	<i>The Presuppositions of Competition</i>	66
	<i>The Competitive Situation</i>	66
	<i>Self-Interest</i>	67
	<i>Human Individuality and Freedom</i>	68
	<i>The Human Herd Instinct and the Need to Compare Oneself with Others</i>	70
	<i>Inequality and Equality</i>	71
	<i>Scarcity</i>	76
	<i>Rules</i>	77
	<i>How Competition Unfolds</i>	80
	<i>Individual Aspects</i>	80
	<i>Collective Aspects</i>	87
	<i>The Consequences of Competition</i>	90
	<i>Competition, Performance, and Production</i>	90
	<i>Competition and Power</i>	94
	<i>Competition and Personal Relationships</i>	96
	<i>Competition and Health</i>	97
	<i>Competition and Society</i>	100
	<i>Competition and Anthropology</i>	102
	<i>References</i>	107

Part II Competition and the Economy

4	Competition and the Economy: Historical Perspectives	115
	<i>Introduction</i>	115
	<i>Economic Classicism</i>	116
	<i>An Early Critic of Economic Classicism</i>	125
	<i>The Neoclassical Theory</i>	126
	<i>Institutional Economic Theory</i>	129
	<i>Microtheoretical Aspects of the Idea of Competition</i>	131
	<i>Macrotheoretical Aspects of the Idea of Competition</i>	136
	<i>The Idea of Competition in Some Alternative Economic Theories</i>	138
	<i>References</i>	149

5	Competition and the Economy: Economic Perspectives	153
	<i>Introduction</i>	153
	<i>What Is the Economy?</i>	157
	<i>The Agents of Competition</i>	160
	<i>The Forms of Competition</i>	162
	<i>Latent and Manifest Competition</i>	162
	<i>Perfect and Non-perfect (Monopolizing) Competition</i>	163
	<i>Free Competition</i>	171
	<i>Competition and Regulation</i>	174
	<i>The Functions and Goals of Competition</i>	176
	<i>Efficiency</i>	176
	<i>Creativity, Quality, and Growth</i>	182
	<i>Distribution</i>	187
	<i>The Goals of Competition</i>	190
	<i>A Market Economy Oriented to Competition—Two Approaches</i>	194
	<i>References</i>	212
6	Competition and the Economy: Anthropological Perspectives	217
	<i>Introduction</i>	217
	<i>The Homo oeconomicus</i>	221
	<i>Rationality</i>	225
	<i>Self-Interest</i>	228
	<i>Individualism and Freedom</i>	231
	<i>Who Is the Homo oeconomicus?</i>	234
	<i>Competition in the Economy and an Anthropology with an Instrumentalist Orientation</i>	237
	<i>Competition in the Economy and an Anthropology with an Egotistic Orientation</i>	244
	<i>Egotism as an Anthropological Category</i>	246
	<i>Egotism, Individualism, and the Competitive Economy</i>	249
	<i>Egotism, Self-Interest, and the Competitive Economy</i>	252
	<i>An Anthropology with an Egotistic Orientation?</i>	258
	<i>Competition in the Economy and an Anthropology with an Elitist Orientation</i>	258
	<i>Competition in the Economy and an Anthropology with a Humanist Orientation</i>	262

	<i>Competition in the Economy and an Anthropology with a Christian Orientation</i>	269
	<i>Economic Competition—Space for Human Dignity?</i>	275
	<i>References</i>	287
7	Competition and the Economy: Ethical Perspectives	291
	<i>Ethics and the Economy</i>	291
	<i>Economic Competition and Ethics</i>	295
	<i>A Naturalistic (Ontological) Perspective on Economic Competition</i>	301
	<i>A Teleological Perspective on Economic Competition</i>	304
	<i>A Deontological Perspective on Economic Competition</i>	308
	<i>Competition and Human Rights</i>	309
	<i>Competition and Justice</i>	312
	<i>A Virtue Ethical Perspective on Economic Competition</i>	316
	<i>References</i>	323
 Part III Competition and Anthropology		
8	Competition and Human Relationships	329
	<i>Introduction</i>	329
	<i>A Relational Definition of the Human Being</i>	332
	<i>Competition and the Human Being’s Relationship to His or Her Own Self</i>	335
	<i>Self-Interest and the Satisfaction of Needs</i>	336
	<i>Individuality, Personal Structure, and Identity</i>	340
	<i>Freedom and Rationality</i>	342
	<i>Self-Realization</i>	344
	<i>Intrinsic Value</i>	346
	<i>The Human Person’s Well-Being</i>	347
	<i>Competition and the Human Being’s Relationship to Others</i>	348
	<i>The Significance of Interpersonal Relationships</i>	349
	<i>Interpersonal Relationships in a Competitive Context—Ethical Perspectives</i>	352
	<i>Compassion, Competition, and Collaboration</i>	359
	<i>Compassion, Competition, and Basic Human Values</i>	364
	<i>Compassion, Competition, Emotions, and Empathy</i>	366

<i>Compassion, Competition, Justice, and Power</i>	367
<i>Competition and the Human Being's Relationship to Nature</i>	368
<i>The Human Being and Nature</i>	368
<i>Competition, the Human Being and Nature</i>	369
<i>Competition and the Human Being's Relationship to God</i>	374
<i>The Human Being in Relationship to God</i>	374
<i>Competition, the Human Being and God</i>	376
<i>Competition, Human Relationships, and the Human Being's Dignity</i>	380
<i>References</i>	388
9 A Humane Competition?	391
<i>Introduction</i>	391
<i>The Positive Contribution of Competition to the Realization of a True Humanity</i>	393
<i>The Negative Contribution of Competition to a True Humanity</i>	395
<i>Focus on the Material Dimension</i>	396
<i>Ranking Human Beings</i>	399
<i>A Means to Attain Something Else</i>	401
<i>A Threat to Fellowship</i>	403
<i>A Threat to True Humanity?</i>	405
<i>A Future with Competition?</i>	406
<i>"I Have Enough"</i>	409
<i>References</i>	411
Author Index	413
Subject Index	417