

# Market Economy Without Egocentric Deviance: A Theology of Excellence Instead of Competition

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*Abstract.* For most scholars and practitioners, a market economy is, fundamentally, an economy of competition. Yet competition is a concept with a diversity of meanings and uses in economics, management, and theology. In this paper I argue that while the Christian worldview can integrate the macro-economic competition structure in which those actors who answer the needs of society are encouraged and those who fail to do so are discouraged, Christian virtues clash with the micro-economic and managerial egocentric assumptions of human agency. After presenting the notion of competition, I explain how (through self-fulfilling prophecy) a distorted interpretation of competition has become a fundamental component of management theory and practice. I discuss the problems of this conception from a theological perspective, and sketch out how the Christian virtue of excellence could replace competition as a driver of business activity without requiring fundamental changes in the macro-economic market model.

*Keywords:* competition, excellence, self-fulfilling prophecy, market economy, work as service, work ethics

## 1. Introduction

For most scholars and practitioners, a market economy is, fundamentally, an economy of competition. Yet, competition is a concept with a diversity of meanings and uses. Among others, differences can be observed between its uses in macro-economics, micro-economics, and management. In macro-economics, competition refers mainly to the process through which those actors that best fit demand will prosper, while those whose offer does not match demand will disappear—so that, overall, the market provides the goods and services necessary for human flourishing. In this sense, competition plays an important role in the coordination of supply and demand. The micro-economic correlative is often that economic agents compete with each other to meet at best the demand—so that they can get some

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income. Based on these assumptions, management theory has developed various models of competitive behavior in finance, marketing, leadership, or human resources.

While acknowledging the competitive market as a place of coordination of supply and demand, I take a theological approach to challenge the micro-economic conception of competition and its implications for management. I argue that the notion of excellence is better aligned with Christian virtues and contributes better to societal flourishing. More precisely, I argue that while a Christian worldview can integrate the macro-economic competition structure in which those actors who answer the needs of society are encouraged and those who fail to do so are discouraged, Christian virtues seem to clash fundamentally with the mainstream micro-economic appraisal of competitive human agency and its related management models.

To support my argument, I first present the use of competition in macro- and micro-economics. I then explain how, through sensemaking and self-fulfilling prophecy, a distorted interpretation of competition has become a fundamental component of management theory and practice. I further discuss the problems of this conception from a theological perspective and sketch out how the Christian virtue of excellence could replace competition as a driver of business activity—without requiring fundamental changes in the macro-economic market competition model.

## 2. From macro-economic regulation to managerial norm

Macro-economic scholars have discussed at length how competition ensures that the goods and services supplied on the market correspond to consumers' demand. In short, while price is the invisible hand's main tool to ensure the prosperous development of all, competition is what drives both producers to offer the right products at the lowest possible price, and customers to look for the best offer in their purchases (Smith 1976; see critically Schumpeter 1975, 84 and 129; Lütge 2019). Suppliers with bad or too expensive goods tend to disappear from the market, while those offering the right products at corresponding prices tend to prosper.

For such a market to function effectively and efficiently, several macro-economic rules are needed. Among others, monopoly (absence of competitors) and cartels (competitors' alliances to circumvent competition) must be avoided (Hay 1991; Sutton 1991, 41). This includes the restriction of patents, as they might distort competition (see Coriat and Orsi 2003). Authors also call for international free trade (Block 1998). As a coordination mechanism, competition is thus essential to a well-functioning market economy. In this paper, and similar to Bruni and Sugden's approach (2008; 2013), I intend neither to refute this nor to discuss it, as I will focus on the micro-economic aspect of competition.

The correlative of this macro-economic competition *structure* is indeed the micro-economic competition *mindset*, often related to the concept of *homo economicus*—whereby economic actors act “as if” they were self-centered, perfectly rational, and pursuing an always

positive marginal utility rate (Friedman 1953, 21–2; see critically Casson 2000, 27 and 48; Blaug 2001, 152–4). While the exact definition of *homo economicus* rationality varies among economists (Hirschfeld 2018, 37), mainstream micro-economics assumes that it is part of the actors' nature to compete for an ever-increasing share of the market and to fulfill their unlimited needs—and so contribute to the welfare and development of the broader society (see, most famously, Friedman 1970). This conception is often traced back to Adam Smith's notions of labor division and self-interest (Smith 1976, vol. 1, ch. I.ii and I.iv). Referring further to evolution theory that legitimizes (in the eyes of some) the idea that those which best adapt to their environment will survive (see Quek 2005, 52; Friedman 2015), the self-centered competition mindset of economic theory has further been applied by various economists to all aspects of human life, including marriage and government (most famously Becker 1976; see critically Poole 2015, 11; as well as Bakan 2004, 22; Bowles 2016, 2; Casson 2000, 2; Menzies and Hay 2014, 581–4; Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2012).

Several economic authors have highlighted the limited empirical validity of these models and have sought to develop more refined approaches of economic agency (e.g., Bowles 2016; Menzies and Hay 2014; Sugden 2018). Nevertheless, these alternatives have not yet impacted the mindset prevailing in business. Without denying their academic relevance and their potential normative impact, this article focuses on the current mainstream business paradigm as prevailing in practice. Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and despite the economists' acknowledgment that "very few economic theories are literally true; most could instead be classified as approximations or generalizations" (Menzies and Hay 2014, 586), several (sometimes overly simplified) aspects of economic theory have gained normative influence over management theory and practice. Various scholars have pointed out that, among other ways through a process identified as self-fulfilling prophecy, words and concepts shape the worldview and actions of human beings (Merton 1959; also Bowles 2016; Hirschfeld 2018). Lakoff and Johnson, for example, argue that metaphors (such the *homo economicus*) provide much more than a vehicle for comparing two elements. They offer "a whole system of concepts with respect to one another" (1980, 14) that highlights some aspects of a situation and makes other aspects less present. Over time, such system "can acquire the status of a truth," as people start acting based on the elements emphasized by the metaphor and begin ignoring other aspects—thus creating a new social reality (1980, 10 and 142–56).

In management, scholars have noticed how necessary it is for actors to be able to refer to such common framework to define the objective to be pursued in a situation, the means by which to reach this goal, the responsibilities of each actor, and the ways to interact with others (Weick 1995; see Sonenshein 2007; Rindova, Becerra, and Contardo 2004). As globalization, pluralization, and specialization have weakened the broader society's framing power over business, the economics-based paradigm dominantly taught in business schools profoundly shaped mental frames and action in business (Gonin, Palazzo, and Hoffrage 2012; Mintzberg 2004; Khurana 2007). Competition-related images that compare business to a game, and the

market to a place for the ‘survival of the fittest,’ have gained a normative power not necessarily intended by their authors (Hamington 2009; see also McCloskey 1983; 1994).

Such self-fulfilling prophecy differs from the crowding-out effect often discussed among economists between extrinsic and intrinsic motivations (e.g., Sugden 2018). While the latter is a psychological process within one’s own motivation mechanisms, the former is a socialization process that takes place through education. Therefore, it is not necessarily the extrinsic incentive itself (such as a wage for the work done), but the *message* often conveyed with it (wage should be your motivation), that transforms one’s mindset (Bowles 2016, 191; Nelson 2009). For Gay, “although we commonly suppose that our tools are simply means to be put to use in the service of purposes that we have determined, our tools have an insidious way of altering these purposes and of modifying our determinations” (2004, 59). In the same vein, Hirschfeld (2018, 200–9) highlights the ambiguity of economics textbooks, which on the one hand claim a non-normative approach, but on the other hand specify non-rational behaviors that people *should* avoid. Callon (2007) as well as MacKenzie and Millo (2003) go further and suggest that financial theories are “performative”: as more and more practitioners are taught—and start using—specific financial equations, financial markets eventually adapt and perform as predicted (or rather, as pre-scripted) by the theory.

Empirically, several studies show that, through such self-fulfilling processes, business actors have started considering economic metaphors such as the *homo economicus* and competition as normative standards to which they ought to abide (Aspen Institute 2003; Ferraro, Pfeffer, and Sutton 2005; Frank, Gilovich, and Regan 1993; Ghoshal 2005; Marwell and Ames 1981). Such a narrowed economic self-understanding clashes with Smith’s original view. The latter embedded, without suppressing, the butcher’s and brewer’s competitive self-interest into a broader moral framework which included a care for the community and so prevented a radical, literal interpretation of self-interest (Smith 1984, VI.ii.3.3; see also Gonin 2014; Werhane 1991; 2006; Wells and Graafland 2012). Indeed, “markets can only deliver their good results to the extent that they can draw on a reservoir of moral sensibilities in the culture” (Hirschfeld 2018, 8).

This deviance from a broader perspective can be illustrated by Porter’s *competitive strategy*. Even though Porter shows a broad approach to competition, he still implicitly reduces market to competition and, henceforth, management to competition strategy (1980, xxi–xxii and figure 1-1). This competition takes a war-like turn as Porter’s work unfolds: Business is about “rivalry,” “battles,” “offensive or defensive action,” “fight,” “picking the battleground,” “retaliation,” and even “shock troops” (1998, 17, 29, 47, 67, 70 and 84–5). As the competition metaphor changes the ultimate objective of business from seeking consumer welfare to beating competition, actors start focusing on the battle itself, unless the broader moral framework of business is explicitly mentioned. They consider it as their duty to act directly *against* existing competitors (e.g., through specific advertising), to set barriers to prevent new competitors and substitutes (e.g., by buying competitors or competitors’ patents on an alternative technology without then using them), and to lock customers into their own

brand (e.g., through excessive switching costs) (Porter 1980, e.g., 7-14; see critically Roels 1995; Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2012, 86). Moreover, the always positive marginal utility rate implies that as long as someone else has a part of the pie, then there is a quasi-constraining possibility to fight an additional battle to increase one's benefits: the game is never over (see critically Sullivan 1995, 675). This fight is further justified by the notion of unlimited progress and growth of society (see critically Bell 1976, 237-43; Gay 2004).

Business might hence become, in the mind of business students unfamiliar with other social and political conceptions of market, a war game disconnected from its broader societal context. It defines its own purpose and norms that impact the way managers conceive of what is praiseworthy and what is not within the business world—and some players acknowledge that they would not like the business norms to guide other spheres of their life (see Bakan 2004, 53-54). The business sphere imposes on corporations, especially the publicly traded ones, the legal obligation “to pursue, relentlessly and without exception, [their] own self-interest, regardless of the often harmful consequences it might cause to others” (Bakan 2004, 1-2). This implies, among others, that corporate social responsibility can only be pursued if it is an “insincere” means for a profit end (Bakan 2004, 34 and 37; see Dubbink 2004; Friedman 1970; Jensen 2002).

### 3. Theological issues with competition

A vast majority of theologians or Christian economists acknowledge the positive contributions of a macro-economic model in which businesses are free to choose the goods and services they want to offer to consumers—knowing that actors who produce goods or services that do not fit consumer needs must be pushed out of the market (see e.g., Gay 2004, 55; Haymond 2016).

Yet at the micro-economic level of the agent, the competition-based and self-centered conception of business has been subject to many criticisms. While a natural drive for competition and wealth is widely acknowledged (see e.g., Schumpeter 1975, 123), several studies show that most people are better driven by their passions and talents (Casson 2000; Fauchart and Gruber 2011; Quek 2005, 57). A competition mindset is thus by far not the only, and even less the best, driver of entrepreneurship, innovation, and economic action. Such observations seem in line with the theological idea that humans were originally created with positive motivations, but the Fall has added more narcissistic and aggressive motivations which can be tamed or strengthened through culture (see also the empirical studies of Miller and Ratner 1998; Ratner and Miller 2001). Based on the long tradition of condemning avarice and greed, theologians regret that economic theory “forgets what the Greeks long ago knew: that temperance is a precondition of the social virtue of justice or public-spiritedness”; and even more problematic, economic theory “makes a social good out of the vice of avarice” (May 1995, 696). By doing so, the current business mindset leads astray the ones who succeed, because they succeed in the wrong objectives: Their unredeemed competition mindset

degrades human relations so important in Christian ethics, “corrupting (and perpetuating the corruption of) human sociality in competitive and conflictual modalities” (Bell, Jr. 2005; see also Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2012; Stevens 2005, 24; Werhane 2006).

While a certain drive for excellence can be praised from a biblical perspective (the apostle Paul fought a fight and ran a race he hoped to finish, and calls the reader to prepare for their own race, see 1 Corinthians 9:24; 2 Timothy 4:7), Christian ethics calls for specifying foremost which race to run, with which goal in mind, and with which mindset. It thus raises the question of the purpose of competition in business, and the type of excellence humans are to pursue. For Hirschfeld, “to think well about economics, we need to recover a discourse about what humans should be” (Hirschfeld 2018, 17). In the absence of a clear ultimate purpose for the market sphere which relates to the nature and purpose of life in general, actors seem lost in an unending race on a closed-loop track in which they follow their own “tyrannical, despotic, and dictatorial” egos (R. Covey, in the Foreword to Greenleaf 2002, 6). Competition imposes an endless fight, as one might feel worthy of life only as it beats the competitors—implying that the others (the ‘losers’) will not feel fully realized as long as they do not win again. Atkinson (2013) challenges this aspect in his discussion of the move, in Qoheleth, from a *chronos* understanding of time, forcing mankind to an endless and unsuccessful competition for some success, to a *kairos*logical conception of work that implies enjoyment and pro-social dynamics.

To sum up, the micro-economic conception of the competition mindset prevailing in business, narrowly focusing on one’s self-interest and on the fight *against* others, is at odds with a Christian perspective that focuses on the Kingdom of God, service to others, and relationships. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the notion of Kingdom of God. It is sufficient here to define it as a world of peace and flourishing of all human beings in community, based on their deeper aspirations—and so in line with God’s eternal desire for humanity and earth (see e.g., Sherman 2011). Yet this perspective does not necessarily imply giving up the market model. An economic *structure* that encourages those actors who address the most pressing needs of society in the most efficient ways (understood in a holistic sense) is theologically praiseworthy and can even be seen as one of the ways common grace can be expressed in society (Haymond 2016; Hirschfeld 2018, 2–3; see also Quek 2005, 56). Following the logic of interdisciplinary discussion between theology and economics (Finn 2010; see also Stuart 2024), the next section outlines a mindset of excellence which remains in line with the macro-economic competition structure.

#### 4. Excellence as an alternative to the competition mindset

Excellence is regularly called for in the Bible. Jesus himself referred to a very old Jewish commandment and asked his disciples to be “perfect, as their Father (God himself) is perfect” (Matthew 5:48; see Leviticus 19:2 as well as Paul’s calls to strive for the good cause). In most Christian traditions, this call to perfection impacts all aspects of life and all dimensions of

perfection (for a brief overview, see Shelton 2017). The 18<sup>th</sup>-century British Methodist preacher Wesley summarizes it as a permanent focus on God's love. "And loving God, [the Christian] 'loves his neighbour as himself;' he loves every man as his own soul. He loves his enemies, yea, and the enemies of God." This requires a profound transformation of one's entire person, thoughts, feelings, and actions—at all times. (Wesley, n.d., para. 10).

Hence, there are ways of striving for excellence and of working hard that are aligned with—and commanded by—Christian teaching (Stevens 2005, 23; Sullivan 1995, 675). Excellence encompasses all domains of personal and communal life, including business, into a coherent holistic worldview—and impacts both thoughts and actions. As a fundamental attitude, it can be related to virtues (in Greek, *arete* means both virtue and excellence). In other words, "in accordance with virtue" just means "in the best possible way" (Graham 2004, 56; see also Sayers 1995). The doctrine of the Fall implies that, on earth, such perfection is never achieved, but to be pursued with humility and acceptance of human fallenness, with perseverance and seriousness, as well as lightness of heart (see e.g., Chalamet 2016; Guinness 2003, ch. 10).

In the Reformed tradition, excellence has been reappraised through the granting to secular activities of a higher call as a contribution to God's Kingdom (Hardy 1990). For instance, John Calvin notes that "no sacrifice is more pleasing to God than when every man applies diligently to his own calling, and endeavors to live in such a manner as to contribute to the general advantage" (quoted in Hardy 1990, 56; see also Garber 2014, 18). Work is not an end in itself—the market cannot be disconnected from a broader societal and spiritual perspective. It contains an eternal value and is thus to be pursued as a vocation, with a sense of duty and service (Gonin 2018). Righteous is not the one who does no wrong, but the one who cares about developing a society in which everybody, including the poor and needy, can flourish (Keller 2012, ch. 1). This perspective, in a market economy, would hold that Friedman's call to maximize profit within the boundaries of law and custom is not enough. The righteous rich develop a deep passion for creating, through business and not only through philanthropy, a thriving society so that the entire community can deeply rejoice about the economic success of the righteous (Sherman 2011).

At this point it may be useful to refer to Poole's (2015, 24) distinction between competitive advantage and comparative advantage. While the former focuses on how to beat competitors, the latter relies on one's intrinsic qualities and passions to deliver a good or service desired by consumers. This does not mean that there is no competition, but that macro-economic competition takes place almost unintentionally, because of our engaging in our unique set of passions and talents for customers' benefit (Casson 2000, 48; Stevens 2005). In the same vein, Bell distinguishes between technical innovations that drive the market toward societal development (such as the automobile or the motion picture), and sociological innovations (such as advertising and planned obsolescence) that do not promote common good. While the former address directly a need of consumers, the latter often benefit only business actors (Bell 1976, 68; on advertising, see Cavanaugh 2005). Santos (2012) applied

similar notions to highlight the specific contribution of social enterprises in the tension between value creation (value brought to the broader society) and value capture (the retention of this value by the producer). Finally, Stevens distinguishes between a (bad) self-oriented ambition (which focuses on autonomous self and might lead to “predatory competition”) and a healthy or godly ambition (which strives primarily “self-control, contentment, faithfulness, neighbor love and praise”) (Stevens 2005, 24–25; see also the discussion of McMullen 2003). Godly ambition therefore includes a profound humility (see Pieper 1986, 28–30).

Excellence is thus not pursued to compete, seek mutual benefit or build a good society. Excellence is pursued because it contributes to the best possible expression of human nature; it has its own intrinsic value as a godly virtue—and market competition is a by-product of this virtue (Hirschfeld 2018, 101ff; Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2012, 73). In Quek’s (2005, 57) terms: “We compete by pursuing goals of excellence.”

Such a distinction implies a subordination of the market ‘goods’ to higher values and a redefinition of efficiency, including that of market efficiency. Developing Aquinas’ thought, Hirschfeld provides a short, yet practical answer through a negation: “any activity that does not move us toward the goods worth desiring is inefficient, full stop” (Hirschfeld 2018, 26). Optimizing market efficiency can thus only make sense in this broader, transcendental understanding of the aim of life and thus of market; market has no end in and of itself, but only as part of a greater, communal and individual, quest (Hirschfeld 2018, 46–7). In Christian perspective, these higher goods are objectively defined realities, not subjective preferences. They include the care for oneself or one’s household—a care that some authors, including Smith, would call self-interest. While self-interest in this limited sense is not necessarily in opposition to Christian virtue, neither does it necessarily imply a competition mindset. Reviewing Bowles, Dix (2017) notes that Bowles makes important steps in challenging traditional incentives and suggesting alternative ones. Dix then asks a more fundamental question: is the incentivizing by the state already an overly narrow economic approach of human virtue?

Thus, excellence as a virtue has two dimensions. The *technical* dimension refers to the skills necessary to excel in a task and so to offer a good or service of interest for consumers. In theological terms, technical excellence values each human life as uniquely created and gifted to answer as well as possible a specific need (see Volf 1991). It requires each actor to discover his/her unique talents and passions and use them to answer consumer needs. It further brings to light the intrinsic eternal value and dignity of work in itself, “a way of life in which the nature of man should find its proper exercise and delight and so fulfil itself to the glory of God” (Sayers 1995, 46 and 59–62). For Quek (2005, 56), market competition can enhance the “value of human relationships by cultivating the best from each person.” Martin Luther King, Jr. eloquently pointed at the spiritual beauty of technical excellence by claiming that “if it falls to your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep the streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, like Shakespeare wrote poetry, like Beethoven composed music; sweep streets so

well that all the host of Heaven and earth will have to pause and say, ‘Here lived a great street sweeper, who swept his job well’” (quoted in Miller 2007, 19).

The second dimension of excellence is the *moral* one. To be excellent, our often overly self-centered ambition must be redeemed through the orthopathy of moral excellence: “the conversion of our passions to line up with God’s *pathos*, what God cares about” (Stevens 2005, 25). In other words, business actors are called to re-discover their more caring, loving, and service-oriented nature—“a charitable logic of donation, gift, and perpetual generosity” (Bell, Jr. 2005). Through orthopathy, business becomes “holistic in breadth” (Bell, Jr. 2005) and embedded in a broader community that compels “a radical decentering of the individual” (Cavanaugh 2005, cf. Matthew 25). For Wyszyński, work is thus, in biblical perspective, a “social duty” requiring an “internal perfection” (1995, chs. 4 and 17). It implies collaborating with other actors as part of a common history and society, in interaction with the other spheres of life and society (see Gorringe 2015). “Virtuous firms would see their main goal as provisioning goods and services that are of real value to their community and as opportunities to exercise their own creativity and skill” (Hirschfeld 2018, 191). Such an attitude does not necessarily contradict a market that coordinates supply and demand, and where suppliers with no ‘interesting’ offer might need to review either the product, the quality, or the price... or go out of business. Seeking mutual benefits is not forbidden and is most likely to result from such attitudes; yet, in contradiction to authors like Sugden (2018), such a quest does not result from individual autonomous decisions to seek mutual gain, but from a deeper sense of responsibility for the common moral aim of life. Whereas the factual market mechanisms might remain unchanged, the mindset, language, and type of social relation between the actors would be transformed. Macro-economic coordination of supply and demand remains, yet the micro-economic competition mindset as well as the related management models (such as principal-agent theory) are transformed.

Therefore, business actors, in a theological perspective, are to work “in a way that reflects God’s plan for the world.” Business actors are to join in the community of life to proclaim and enact faith in a God of abundance (Hauerwas 2010; see Shmemann 1963). This includes a concern for all stakeholders (including the environment) that reflects a divine concern for the world, for all individuals, and for relations between people—within the limits of our capabilities (Keller and Alsdorf 2012, 165; see also Tunehag, McGee, and Plummer 2004 as well as biblical texts such as John 13:34; Ephesians 5:1-3; Phillipians 2). Such a quest should, however, not lead to anxious perfectionism. The Christian understanding of human nature implies imperfection. Excellence is thus to be sought with ambition, but at the same time with the peace of mind that comes with the understanding of our limitations. The aim is not to be perfect, but for each person to serve as well as they can, based on their specific capabilities.

In this perspective, work is “a major instrument of God’s providence” through which people can serve others (Keller and Alsdorf 2012, 186; see also Sherman 2011; Wyszyński 1995). Rather than being oriented toward competitors and/or self-attainment, ambition is oriented toward a greater transcendental aim that includes the whole community (Miller 2005,

257; see also Benefiel 2005). The famous Puritan preacher Baxter expressed this idea by challenging Christians to seek not the calling “in which you may be most rich or honorable in the world; but that in which you may do most good” (quoted in Ryken 1987, 171 as part of an interesting chapter on work and service). Similarly, the Reformers called for putting others’ interests first, for prices being determined on the basis of fairness rather than through market mechanisms, and for lending without expecting back (Calvin 1995; Luther 1995; see also Gonin 2018; Mangeloja 2023). This other-regarding orientation constrains business actors to “be discriminating in what [they] choose to produce and market” (Roels 1995, 913), and to make sure “that other people’s highest priority needs are being served” (Greenleaf 2002, 27; see Hirschfeld 2018, 24–5).

The focus on societal contribution (rather than directly on the stakeholders) requires, however, a more refined definition of need than merely anything for which actors would be ready to pay for on the market (Sturm 1973, 345–6). The virtue of contentment contradicts economic theory, which assumes always positive marginal utility, and its correlate that our “greed presumes and perpetuates a world of scarcity and want” in which we cannot “trust that God has given all that we need” (Hauerwas 2010). Further, while economics does not discriminate between needs, desires, and wants (see Akerlof and Shiller 2015, 4; Hirschfeld 2018, 62–3; Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2012, 36f and 87f), a Christian ethics approach focuses on the real, profound aspirations of the human heart, rather than on their material expression on the market. Sometimes, a profound desire and its expression on the market are very similar, as in the case of food. There is nothing wrong in fulfilling this basic physiological need with the enjoyment of good food; it might, however, become bad when eating is biased (as in cases of eating disorders) or is used as a way to compensate for other, deeper aspirations or for stress (most famously perhaps in the case of chocolate and caffeine addictions—but of course, not all consumption of chocolate or coffee automatically reflects an addiction). Moral excellence implies that the needs to be answered through one’s work are to be evaluated in light of the values and priorities that correspond to our true human nature. This might lead in some cases to refraining from heeding, and exploiting, such biased ‘needs.’ While for a long time, many Christians already restrained themselves from investing in certain industries (such as the military, pornography, or tobacco), new environmental, sociological, and personal issues might require a deeper theological reflection on today’s priorities to be addressed by businesses (Roels 1995, 913; Sherman 2011; Volf 1991).

This points to the situational and dynamic aspect of excellence (See Sayers 1995). As both the context of business and the needs of people change, the practical application of moral excellence changes. Prudence—or practical wisdom—is necessary to combine technical aspects (being able to identify what would work to attain a goal) with moral excellence. The latter is defined as the capacity of identifying the goal to be pursued, communally and individually, in a specific situation, without losing sight of the broader framework (Hirschfeld 2018, 113; see Roca 2008, 611). Moral imagination allows us to anticipate changes to answer real, deeper needs and to motivate partners to join in the development—through creative

(self-)destruction—of new solutions (Casson 2000, 1; Greenleaf 2002, 37–40; Schumpeter 1975, 81–6; Werhane 2006).

Further, the double definition of excellence implies that, when measuring success, the moral goal of action is to be taken into account. While any “win” over a competitor might be seen as positive in a mere competitive market, excellence suggests that some successes are not excellent, because they lack moral excellence (Hardy 2016, ch. 1). From a biblical perspective, success and contentment are not dependent on competitors’ successes and failures, but merely on the way in which we answer our own personal calling (See Stevens 2005, 26). This does not mean that business actors are to refuse success in earthly terms, if encountered. Yet “by not concerning themselves with attaining success, but instead concerning themselves with being servants”, Jesus and more generally people who succeeded in ways different than the ones praised by the world “allowed success to surprise them and overtake their activities” (Miller 2005, 257). Contrary to short-term competition, long-term excellence allows for all competitors to win, as long as they finish their own personal race toward their calling (Quek 2005, 56; see 1Cor 9:24-26).

More fundamentally, Christian excellence turns the focus of business actors away from business toward service and society—in other words, to other people. For Roels, “God does not ask that we complete the economic tasks in this world, only that we add to the kingdom.” Success must thus be measured in terms of how well we fulfill our personal share in “unfolding God’s kingdom on earth” (Roels 1995, 912 and 915). Such success cannot be counted either in material terms, or even in terms of “the most friends or the most good deeds or the most converts or the most victories”; all of these measures miss the point, because the actors “are not willing to attain success on the way of the servant” (Miller 2005, 257). Christian excellence unavoidably requires humility and sacrifice. Should another actor better serve our community as regards a specific need, we might, in the ideal case, rejoice for the ‘competitor’ (considered as a brother in humanity) and for the good they provide for the community, while seeking another (real) need to be answered for which our own capacities and limitations might be better suited. Such an approach contrasts with Hewitt’s book written “for Christians resolved to seek power, authority, and influence,” since in our society “power, authority, and influence go *only* to those who seek them” (Hewitt 2003, ix). While the author’s desire to shape this world according to the Kingdom of God is certainly to be commended from a Christian perspective, this book seems to contain a type of counsel that clashes with most of the broader biblical teaching on humility. As noted in McMullen’s review of the work, “it is astonishing that counsel this nakedly calculating would be given so unapologetically as a Christian manifesto” (McMullen 2003, 40). Again, this commentary does not mean the systematic suppression of self-interest, but rather its integration into a broader mindset that acknowledges the necessity of a well-functioning societal framework for civilized self-interest to bring prosperity through market.

## 5. Limitations

This paper presents a new paradigm regarding the articulation between macro-economic competition and micro-economic excellence. As such, it presents the fundamental mindset and logic upon which this new paradigm would be built. It is beyond the scope of this paper, however, to offer a comprehensive discussion of the implications of this change for either the many fields of economics and management or the many domains of social and political sciences. This discussion therefore has several limitations. First, the alternative model sketched out in this paper needs further refinement before gaining high practicality. This must, however, not be seen as a reason for its *ex ante* rejection. As noted in the first part, the mainstream model gained practical relevance and normative authority through the self-fulfilling prophecy effect that aligned people's self-understanding and societal structures with what began as a mere theoretical framework known for its low practicality and empirical failure. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to count on the self-fulfilling prophecy effect for a currently emerging theoretical framework to gain normative legitimacy (see Gonin 2007).

Second, the first part of this paper only discusses the mainstream understanding of competition in economics and management theory, without addressing the many nuances and alternative understandings proposed in the literature. Among others, 'softer' and adapted concepts of competition as emerging in some business research, such as the concept of corporate citizenship or servant leadership in management, or community of advantage and experimental economics in the field of economics, have not been addressed here. It must be noted, however, that some authors criticize these approaches exactly because they do not challenge the foundational economic assumptions underlying business—and so cannot succeed in initiating a real change of mindset in the market economy (see Dubbink 2004).

Third, this paper does not address the transition from the current mainstream competition-based worldview to an excellence-based one. While a thorough analysis of such a change process is needed, several hints can be gained from the theories mobilized in this paper. Among others, the self-fulfilling prophecy effect points to the importance of having a broad discussion on the issue and of teaching alternative models in business schools to initiate such change. Further, the metaphor discussion shows the importance of not only developing a language and images that emphasize values related to technical and moral excellence, but also downplaying language and images related to games and war. In addition, key actors in society and politics need to endorse and promote the new framework and language. As was the case for the establishment of the current mainstream paradigm, education must be complemented by a thorough discussion of the political, social, and economic measures necessary to ensure the implementation of the new mindset. Among others, Hirschfeld notes the tension, for a government, between developing a framework based on *where individuals actually are*, and attempting to create a society based on *where people ideally would be* (2018, 27 and 73; see also Bowles 2016). Skidelsky and Skidelsky's (2012, ch. 7) final chapter sketches some possibilities, showing that ways are possible between

these two options—but these need not only further refinement but foremost real political will to move in a specific direction.

Fourth, this paper has not addressed the issue of dealing with merely self-interested actors in a context dominated by the excellence paradigm. While this issue might benefit from discussions about the free-rider problem in traditional market models, it certainly needs further investigation. Among others, the articulation between transmitting virtue-related messages and an extrinsic-based sanction mechanism needs to be further developed (see, for instance, Bowles 2016; Boyd, Gintis, and Bowles 2010; Hirschfeld 2018, ch. 7). Theology could bring specific contributions with respect to the principles of justice and fairness as well as the virtues of service and self-sacrifice.

Similarly, this model builds on a specifically Christian conception of history and life that relates work to a broader worldview and understanding of the meaning of life in general. As such, the model is especially true and reasonable for people embracing such a vision, as it requires a trust and self-sacrifice that might be challenging if not complemented by the Christian faith. Yet, while from a theological perspective business activity cannot be detached from the rest of a Christian's worldview and life in the world, explicit references to theology and Christian faith are not a necessary condition for the development of an excellence-based mindset in the market economy. As shown, excellence does not challenge the fundamental basic assumptions and models of macro-economics. A full development of how (and to what extent) Christian virtues such as excellence can or cannot be internalized by people of other or no faith is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, several theological concepts (e.g., several naturalist approaches of virtues, attempts to universalize Christian ethics, as well as the Protestant notions of common grace and cultural mandate; see e.g., Bockmuehl 1988; Sherman 2011; Wolters 2005) as well as many empirical examples of non-Christian actors addressing the needs of their fellow humans (or in economic terms, providing supply to specific demands) with all their passion and talents suffice to prove that technical and moral excellence can be sufficiently pursued without necessarily sharing the Christian faith (see e.g., Bornstein 2004; Sen 1987; 1999).

This leads to a final yet fundamental question to be pursued: The relation between individual and community. Christian virtue is strongly integrated in persons as members of a body. While each person is responsible for herself, the community is essential in shaping, developing and supporting virtuous members. “Christians differed from their pagan forebears only in so far as they viewed world-rejection as a collective project, not an expression of personal independence. Agape, or brotherly love, replaced *autarkia*, or self-sufficiency, as the motive for renunciation” (Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2012, 78). In this sense, the Christian moral excellence approach radically differs from contractarian or liberal models of reformed markets that still build on autonomous actors, such as Sugden (2018; see critically Mintzberg, Simons, and Basu 2002).

## 6. Conclusion

Rather than challenging the ideas (1) that only those goods and services that best answer people's (real) needs are to be offered and (2) that actors that do not match the needs of society need to find another niche where they could better excel, the excellence-based model implies instead an even greater intentionality in this quest. These two dimensions remain fundamental to competition as macro-economic market coordination. What the model does challenge is the prevailing micro-economic conception of the actors' fundamental mindset, drivers, and motivations. Without denying that the fallen human nature might naturally act as if it were *homo economicus*, the Christian tradition also highlights the human capacity to transcend itself. Instead of acting out of a spirit of competition, actors are called to act out of a spirit of excellence that is driven by their unique set of talents and passions, the current and future needs of the society, and the desire to work in and for a community pursuing explicit objective and values of peaceful flourishing of all persons and creation according to their true nature. By doing so, this model might ensure that the market still fulfills its macro-economic objective, while preventing some of the detrimental consequences of deviant micro-economic and management theories based on radical competition.

I do not contend that this alternative mindset will guarantee business success to all. Yet the current model provides no guarantee of any type of success at all and, more fundamentally, one may question whether seeking this success is really what business is about (on the way to measure the success of the economy, see Sedláček 2013). Instead, I suggest that the excellence mindset is simply the one that goes along with a Christian theology that values the gifts and capabilities of each individual as well as their specific contribution to the common good.

In this sense, I heartily agree with Bell's claim that "the alternative to capitalism is not something that we construct; rather, it is something we confess" (Bell, Jr. 2005). It requires that our business practices build on, and point to, our profound aspirations and convictions as human beings.

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