Giving Style: The Connection Between Personal Projects and Competition

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1 Introduction

Personal projects are tricky. Everyone has their own, and somehow they are all valuable, yet I have no reason to pursue your projects and you have no reason to pursue mine. Our projects depend on us and our goals, but in what way? They aren’t just arbitrary so that whatever happens to be our project counts as a legitimate endeavor. Rather, there seems to be some logic to it all; something we’re after when we pursue a project of any kind.

In this paper, I do two things. First, I try to clarify the difficulty posed by personal projects for a theory of reasons. In short, the problem is this: merely desiring something doesn’t make it valuable, so projects must take their value from the type of activity they are, but if they take their value from what type of activity they are, then it doesn’t seem to matter who takes them up. Second, in response to this problem, I investigate the value and structure of competition and offer it as a model for thinking about projects.

2 Projects, Commitments, and Goals

People care about different things. This fact is unremarkable from the perspective of everyday life but central to moral theorizing. The rich category of what individuals are most devoted to has gone under various labels such as commitments, projects, or goals, and the intuitive idea is easily seen with examples. One of my goals is to become an experienced scuba diver, my neighbor is committed to fighting environmental degradation, and my friend wants to renovate his house using his own two hands. There may be distinctions to draw between these categories, but I’m more interested in the similarities: projects, goals and commitments are ways in which a person expresses his uniqueness in a concrete and specific activity (For the rest of the paper, I refer to all three of these categories with the label “personal projects”). Can we be more precise about this type of human good? I think so. In this section, I try to sharpen the idea of personal projects as a commonsense category of concern.

Everyday life reflects a complicated but roughly tripartite spectrum of interests. On one extreme lies moral interests: people have an interest in not being harmed or disrespected. These are stringent and powerful interests that demand a high level of respect from other people. At the other edge of the spectrum are esoteric interests, which are usually understood as mere desires or preferences. People want their neighbors to be quieter, or they want to dress better, or they want brown walls instead of green. In the middle lies personal projects which are weightier than mere preferences but not as important as moral interests. Personal projects take characteristics from both poles, but resist assimilation to either one.
Take moral interests first. Moral interests are thought to give rise to broad protections. If I come across a traveler who desperately needs water, then I have a reason to give him some, but not due to anything about his identity or mine. Anyone would have a reason to help, and in fact, anyone would have reason to help not only this traveler, but any traveler they found at risk of dehydration. From a moral point of view, it’s not important that I have water and that he needs it. Rather, someone needs water and someone else has it. The fact that the someone happens to be me gives me reason to help, but other particular people could be substituted into the situation without changing the overall calculus: there is reason to avert death by dehydration when possible.

Personal projects function differently. If I come across someone learning to play the guitar, I don’t have a reason to help, or if I do, the reason is weak, and more importantly, asymmetrical in strength. In other words, if I’m trying to read a book and my neighbor is practicing the guitar, my reason to keep reading is greater than my reason to provide guitar lessons, even if I’m an expert guitarist. I may be friendly and decide to help anyway, but I am permitted to continue on my own project instead of walking over to coach my neighbor. My neighbor need not be concerned with my reading and I need not be concerned with his guitar playing.

The asymmetry of personal projects makes it tempting to think of them as sophisticated desires, which I supposedly experience as psychological invisible hands, goading me and only me to their satisfaction.

Again though, personal projects resist being identified with desires, and the reasons why are all variations on a theme: projects are more substantial than desires. For one thing, personal projects lack the capriciousness or triviality of mere desires. They are usually developed over a period of time and, critically, often require willpower to complete. Someone who wants to learn to play the guitar usually needs no encouragement to practice; they are excited to learn. Sometimes though, when one doesn’t feel like practicing, the importance of the project compels renewed effort anyway. Mere desires behave differently. If I change my mind from wanting vanilla to wanting chocolate, I don’t try to pluck up the willpower to order vanilla anyway. The change in my desire decides the issue, whereas projects – though related to our desires – take on a life of their own.

Our attitude toward the projects of others, often summarized as tolerance, is similarly unique. We respect the projects of others even if we don’t think they are worthwhile. We say things like “I know he’s trying to document the social habits of the Colorado Potato Beetle, but I just don’t see the value in that activity.” This is closely related to our thought process in deciding our own projects; some things stand out as worthy pursuits while others don’t. To use a stereotype, a conservative might see being a good soldier, police officer,
or entrepreneur as worthwhile endeavors, while thinking less of being a good animal rights activist, surfer, or movie star, though still tolerating these ways of life. The competing urges of toleration and judgment, acceptance and ranking, would be inappropriate if projects were like desires. If I order vanilla and you order chocolate, there is nothing for me to respect and nothing for me to judge. We’re just different.

In summary, I think personal projects occupy a complicated middle space between moral interests on one hand and desires and preferences on the other. We answer to morality, but our desires answer to us. Projects are different. We are their creators and masters, but they can change us, guide us, and even dominate us.

3 Reasons and Objectivity

As I said above, moral interests are thought to provide reasons to everyone. Nagel agrees. In his terminology there is a neutral reason to prevent pain which stems from the neutral (dis)value of pain. 1

Difficult as it may be to carry out, each of us has reason to give significant weight to the simple sensory pleasure or pain of others as well as to his own. When these values occur in isolation, the results can be demanding. If you and a stranger have both been injured, your have one dose of painkiller, and his pain is much more severe than yours, you should give him the painkiller – not for any complicated reasons, but simply because of the relative severity of the two pains, which provides a neutral reason to prefer the relief of the more severe.

(VFN 167-168) 2

1Nagel and I talk about values, but this is not intended as an ontological thesis, but rather just a way to note the justification for various types of reasons. Values and the reasons that spring from them are just a way of privileging certain types of actions over others.

2The structure of the reason described here can be formalized. Let \( x \)R be short for \( 'x \) has reason to\', let \( x \) range over all moral agents, and let \( y \) range over all people (beings?) capable of feeling pain.

\[ (1) \forall x (x \text{R}[\forall y (\text{alleviate the pain of } y)]) \]

(1) claims that all moral agents have reason to alleviate the pain of any person, whether that person be himself or someone else. The reason is neutral. Compare this to

\[ (2) \forall x (x \text{R}[\text{alleviate the pain of } x]) \]

which is agent relative, because it claims that each moral agent has reason to alleviate his own pain. Thus, the location of free occurrences of \( x \) is one clean way to divide agent-relative from agent-neutral reasons. If a reason that an agent has can only be formulated by placing \( x \) within the scope of the ‘reason to’ operator, the reason is agent-relative and agent neutral otherwise. This is taken from McNaughton and Rawlings, see the bibliography for the full citation.
As Nagel realizes, it would be overkill to treat personal projects in the same way as pain and pleasure. If personal projects were treated as having neutral value and so generating neutral reasons, \(^3\) I would have reason to help every other person achieve their personal projects, and I would have to be indifferent between the fulfillment of my project and someone else’s. I would not be able to accord any special concern to my projects. Seeing this difficulty, Nagel tries, in *The View from Nowhere*, to account for the agent-relative structure of personal projects. I think it’s worth quoting Nagel’s division between agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons at length.

There are two ways in which a value may be conditional on a desire: the value may lie either outside or inside the conditional, so to speak. In the former case, a person’s having X if he desires X has neutral value satisfaction of the desire has objective utility that everyone has reason to promote. In the latter case, if a person desires X, his having X has relative value for him: susceptibility to the value is conditional on having the desire, and satisfaction of the desire does not have impersonal utility. It isn’t easy to state a general rule for assigning desires to one category or the other. I have claimed that sensory experiences which we strongly like or dislike simply in themselves have agent-neutral value because of those desires. Such immediate likes and dislikes, not resulting from any choice or underlying reason, are very different from the desires that define our broader aims and ambitions. The former result in mental states that are transparently good or bad, because the attitude of the subject is decisive. (167-168)

I doubt that desires are the right place to start thinking about personal projects. First, and less important, is that people experience projects as more than desires. Up to a point, people will expend willpower to further a project, even after the desire for it has faded or disappeared altogether. As Korsgaard points out, projects are not experienced as things we want to do, but as somehow valuable in their own right (38-39). As I put it before, most people try to respect projects of all types while still retaining a personal ranking of what projects are more worthwhile than others. Also, one may have no desire to pursue a project that one finds valuable.

Second and more importantly is that desires don’t underpin reasons for action in a robust way. According to Nagel, desires about pain, pleasure, and access to opportunities are close enough “to home” that they create agent-neutral reasons (everyone has reason to promote these things) but other desires – the ones that wander further from home and so concern things like posthumous fame – only create agent-relative reasons. The problem is

\(^3\)∀x(∀R[∀y (advance y’s projects)])
that desires that stray too far from home, which is to say, too far from any values, don’t seem be reasons of any kind. Take Rawls’ example of the person who has a dearly held project to count blades of grass on various lawns (432). It’s true that such a desire does not provide an agent neutral reason in favor of it’s satisfaction, but it doesn’t seem to provide an agent-relative reason either. Even the person who has this desire has no reason to go around counting blades of grass. One has a burning desire to say to this person, “I know you want to count blades of grass, but why do you want to?” Without an answer to that question, the desire seems arbitrary and so not reason providing. But if that’s true, then it seems that desires only provide a reason for action (even an agent-relative one) if they are aimed at something that is valuable, and we are back where we started. If projects provide reasons only insofar as they promote or are connected to certain values, then it seems that again we should be indifferent to whether we or our neighbor takes up the project. The values that our projects aim at is what allows them to generate reasons, but then their being done, and not our doing them is what matters.

Here, Nagel might concede that desires can’t be reasons for action, but still claim that they can transform agent neutral reasons into agent-relative ones. In other words, maybe it’s true that desires can’t create a reason, but perhaps they can modify the scope of an already existent one. This creates a new problem though, because many values are agent-neutral or agent-relative depending on the context rather than desires. For example, pretend that exercise is valuable because its healthy, and that I desire to start an exercise program. According to this interaction view of values and desires, I now have a reason to exercise that is not interchangeable with the person next to me. But pretend that I’m on the space shuttle and that my full exercise routine will prevent other astronauts from exercising enough to prevent muscle atrophy. In this case, my desiring to follow my exercise routine doesn’t seem to give me reason to privilege my own health. Rather it seems that health now functions as a neutral value, providing me a reason to exercise sparingly so that everyone else can get enough exercise. 4 But if the circumstances and not the presence or absence of my desire is what dictates whether a value will generate agent relative or agent neutral reasons, then it seems that projects are again demoted. When we’re on earth and thinking about joining a gym, we are permitted to try and make ourselves healthy (the circumstances allow it, but maybe not if one is a maximizer), but there’s no real reason that I should pursue health, just the fact that the value of health happens to be permissibly

4The claim here is not that I should pursue my exercise plan even at the cost of the other astronauts – that the value of personal projects is overriding – but to show how that my desire to perform some valuable activity is unimportant since a change in circumstances makes my desire irrelevant but preserves the importance of the value.
promoted by me at this time.

I’ve focused on Nagel’s attempt to square projects with the objective viewpoint, and I’ve claimed that it fails, but others will try to make adjustments. For example, Scanlon starts by denying that reasons must spring from values in the teleological fashion that I’ve assumed (79-81), and Korsgaard believes that reason start as relative rather than neutral and are built into more comprehensive reasons through cooperation (24-25).

I think there are problems for these views as well, but I’m going to skip over the details in favor of some general comments. As I see it, a chasm has been created between the personal space of projects and the objective landscape of impartiality, and both are critical. A choice is then forced on the theorist: assimilate everything to one of the two sides or embrace both domains but admit that they are forever separate. A better approach would be to find a neutral value that mandates agent-relative actions. One such value is competition.

4 The Value of Competition

When philosophers consider special relationships, they invariably imagine family ties or friendships, by which two people are held closer together and so adjust their attitudes, expectations, and responsibilities accordingly. 5 Often neglected is an opposite type of special relationship which works by pushing two people further apart and thereby instituting different but no less valuable changes in attitudes and expectations. I have in mind the relation between two opponents or competitors. In this section, I explore the value of competition by tracing its unique structure.

Some activities require the existence of barriers and limitations provided by nature. Mountain climbers challenge the shape of the earth, sprinters push against the limitations of the human body, and hunters match wits with their quarry. In these activities, nature presents constraints which are then surmounted, pushed against, or used to draw out certain types of activity on the part of individual. In competition, the same effect is achieved by substituting human beings for nature; instead of pitting person against nature, competition pits person against person. Agriculture transformed the natural production of food by the ecosystem into the social production of food by people. Similarly, competition replicates the overcoming of nature within the walls of human institutions. Competition is the social production of excellence.

Today, sports provide the easiest way to understand the structure and value of compe-

5 E.g., Stocker (1976), Scanlon (1999), and Scheffler (1997)
tion. For my purposes, sports provides two related lessons; that competition is *directly adversarial but indirectly cooperative*.

Think about a ballet troupe putting on a show. The goal of each dancer is the same, to contribute to a good show, and as cooperation and coordination between the dancers increases, the quality of the performance improves. The beauty and excellence of a ballet comes from the grace of each dancer, but also from the degree of synchronization that is achieved. In sports, the opposite is true. Both teams or competitors have opposing goals and a given competition gets more exciting the more each team proves to be a match for the other. Notice that an adversarial (agent-relative) mindset is conceptually necessary for competition. Larry Bird and Magic Johnson’s rivalry was the source of many great basketball games, but not due to their desire to choreograph displays of basketball excellence. Rather, each one would have preferred to win decisively and if necessary, boringly. Imagine though that Johnson and Bird were not animated by the desire to win. Instead, pretend that they got together before the game and agreed to try and put on the best display of basketball skill. They might succeed in putting on a great show, but it would be just that, an exhibition game. The fire of competition would be lacking and for the obvious reason that each player has not embraced his adversarial role.

Nonetheless, for all the importance of the competitive spirit and the desire to win, sports are indirectly cooperative. How can this be? Return to the ballet example. A ballet produces beauty as the intended result of cooperation. A sports game produces excellence and instill awe as unintended side-effects of mutual obstruction. One can think of it as the relationship between paint and canvas. The exploits of a given athlete gain their inspiring power from the counteracting presence of the opposition, without which skill cannot be displayed. Examples are everywhere. When Julius Erving windmills around Kareem Abdul-Jabbar for his famous reverse layup, his physical ability is undoubtedly on display, but what really makes the play so enthralling is that it succeeds despite an equally skilled defender. Erving confronts an equal opponent and is forced to innovate as a result. The relationship between competitors heightens excellence by creating opportunities for spontaneous and exemplary actions. Receiver and cornerback, shortstop and base runner, a power forward and his defender are both necessary for a great play. Sportsmanship, hand-shaking after a game, and the admiration that most players have for one another is just the recognition of this mutual dependence.  

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6Nietzsche makes this point aphoristically, “You must be proud of your enemies: then the successes of your enemy are your successes too” (Zarathustra 34).
Competition creates a special type of excellence which, in Nagel’s terminology, has neutral value. Unlike other values though, competition requires an agent-relative attitude. Two tennis players that go into a match thinking “I want the fans to see a genuinely competitive five set game,” have, by aiming directly at the value of competition, put it beyond reach; the two are just putting on an exhibition game. A competitor cannot be indifferent between winning and having the opponent win, even if the game would be equally competitive, regardless of the winner. The agent-neutral value of competition requires an agent-relative stance.

5 Projects and Competition

J.S. Mill, in *On Liberty* discusses freedom of thought and speech, and then the value of individuality. In the section on speech, Mill talks about how even manifestly false opinions should be tolerated because their existence spurs a continued and active defense of the truth (34). His argument is truth should be held in a certain way, which necessitates its continued defense. At the times the argument borders on an appeal to the competition between ideas.

In the section on individuality, he argues that people must be free to make choices for themselves so that they can strengthen their power of judgment (55-56) and so that human development does not stagnate under the pressure of mass opinion, but rather, is continually renewed with new practices (63-64). I’m sympathetic to this account, but as it stands, it offers only instrumental justification. People should be allowed to pursue projects because they will think of new ways of living and learn to make judgments better. But what about projects that aren’t groundbreaking and why sharpen one’s own judgment when others could use just as much help?  

Still I think Mill is on the right track here, and I think his general strategy can be filled in with what I’ve said about competition.

Competition about ideas takes place under the constraint of truth and justification. One can be right or wrong or justified or not. Similarly, ways of life are also in competition, except that there are not matters of fact about which types of lives are worth living and which are vapid. Should one seek adventures or riches, love or accomplishment? These questions don’t have an answer, but projects are the ways in which humans try to take sides. In disputes about matters of fact, arguments are made, discussed and reflected on, but in the disagreements about what is the best life to lead, one does not argue one way or another, one *lives* in one way or another. Arguments are replaced by projects.

7After all, Mill was a utilitarian.
I believe that projects must be connected to values, and this is what prevents things like grass counting from generating reasons for action, but the fact that some projects are valuable and some are not still leaves a lot of questions open about how to organize values and projects in a harmonious or interesting way. The answers cannot be found by merely reflecting, but by living. For example, Gandhi organized his various projects and commitments in such a way to demonstrate the value of self-sufficiency, asceticism, and anti-colonialism. In a similar way, the most quotidian projects are attempts to join in the age-old debate about the good life. In a specific sense, taking on projects is the way that people stop being spectators and instead join the “game of life” as a participant.

But if there are no matters of fact about what lives are better, how can there be a competition? What is the object of the game? The answer I think can be put in Nietzschean terms, though I think without indulging his more esoteric assumptions. Throughout his writings, Nietzsche is obsessed with the enormous influence Socrates had on western civilization. Indeed, he believes we are still sleeping under the spell of an essentially a Christian/Socratic ideology and that philosophers alone have the ability to wake us up by crafting new values. Now, Nietzsche thinks that all values are constructed, which I disagree with, and he also thinks that philosophers are the only people who can introduce new values, which I also disagree with, but what he does get right is that we can capture the imagination and allegiance of others just by living our life with determination. Nietzsche thinks Jesus and Socrates are good examples of people who had a lasting influence as a result of their particular way of life, but there are others such as Vaclav Havel, Timothy Leary, T. E. Lawrence, Mozart, and on and on. And as Nietzsche also gets right, willpower is often essential to influence human ways of life. The more dedicated one is to one’s projects the more likely they will take on significance in the minds of others.

But all this is not meant to be a crude defense of glory or fame. The argument I’m advancing does not require grandiose designs on human history or an obsession with one’s legacy (though examples involving egomaniacs like Nietzsche dramatize the point). All it requires is that people, whether ambitious or humble, live their projects with conviction. By doing so, they throw their hat into the ring and offer up their way of life for consideration. They participate in the creation of new ways of life that must contend against others for recognition, and the value of their participation comes about whether they intend greatness or anonymity.

These observations about competition are nicely compatible with what I claimed were

8As Nietzsche says, to give style to oneself is “a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye” (Gay Science 232).
some of the distinguishing features of projects. Projects are seen as valuable to us and inspire sacrifice because they are the ways in which we participate in an ongoing activity: the everyday jostling over what type of life to lead. Projects are more than desires because they are not simply what we are, but what we would like to be; they are refinements of our character. And we respect the projects of others even as we exalt our own because of the indirectly cooperative nature of competition. The projects of others provides a foundation from which we sometimes follow, but often challenge. We acknowledge, like good sports, that it takes all types for competition to take place.

6 Conclusion

Let me end by trying to sum up the view I’ve presented. Projects must fall inside the bounds of morality, otherwise, they are wrong to pursue, and they must be connected to values, otherwise, why pursue them? But if they are connected to values, then why should we be concerned with our own projects rather than the general stock of projects? Answers in terms of the value of happiness, creativity, freedom, and others fail, because they do not conceptually require an agent to take his own projects seriously, as the value of competition does. We take our own projects seriously then, because they embody what we take to be an ideal life. When we take on a project, we join the fray of ways of being, and champion our own. In the process, we help draw out uniqueness from others, and are changed in turn. All this I think demystifies (and tames) some of Nietzsche’s otherwise cryptic (and outrageous) thoughts. We don’t create values (they’re already there to justify action) as he thought, but we do create ways of life, and not (usually) by arguing others into becoming vegetarians or learning to climb mountains, but by living our own life with zeal and happiness.

References


