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Robert G. Osterhoudt  
*University of Minnesota*

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The College at  
**BROCKPORT**  
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK



**ROBERT OSTERHOUDT**

*Assistant Professor of Physical Education  
University of Minnesota*

## ON KEATING ON THE COMPETITIVE MOTIF IN ATHLETICS AND PLAYFUL ACTIVITY

by

Robert G. Osterhoudt

### I

In accord with the principle of charity, we must allow Professor Keating his conception of competition as: “. . . an attempt, according to agreed-upon rules, to get or to keep any thing either to the exclusion of others or in greater measure than others.”<sup>1</sup> That is, such a phenomenon has been frequently and accurately observed, it seems, and it is thereby not a vacuous concept (an idea without an object, or fact) we have of it, irrespective of the term employed to represent, or signify it. We are also given to take as unproblematic, as Professor Keating claims, that such a phenomenon provides a socially useful mechanism (assists in the construction and maintenance of a viable social hierarchy) for determining our place, or position, in relation to others with respect to any particular ability. It, in effect, provides for an amicable testing of powers and is in this sense helpful in terms of its encouraging self-discovery and thereby contributing to the public interest. We acknowledge as well Professor Keating's disposition to axiologic subjectivism, allowing that this competition is in and of itself ethically neutral, and its ethical status waits upon human objectives for, and experiences of, it.

The crucial question here, then, the one upon which the very preservation of athletics may well rest, is that concerning the nature of man, the social substance, and the common good as located in athletic competition. That is, this competition is in the end justified by Professor Keating himself as contributing to the common good; such that, an adequate understanding of the competitive strife requires an explanation of it in view of the common good, and not in isolation by itself alone. Professor Keating's treatment while instructive in itself fails to secure a tenable conclusion largely because it does not consider the consequences of such a treatment in terms of its implications for a synoptic view of man, the social substance, and the common good. If Professor Keating's examination is lacking in any respect, then, it is apparently lacking in the vision of the metaphysician to carry the inquiry further, and to set out its first principles and plausible consequences more explicitly, comprehensively, and systematically. The dispute here, then, is one with respect to the order of generality at which these various phenomena operate. And more so than a disputation, or refutation, of Professor Keating's theses, it is rather the hope to offer an interpretive extension of them.

The major observation we wish to make here is that Professor Keating's conception of competition does not, and ought not, commit us inexorably to the notion that it is the excelling, or vanquishing of others which is of primary

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significance in this process. For Professor Keating himself rather allows that we encourage this sort of activity in the economic and political spheres, as it operates in the end to the common good. It is the common good, then, which we seek foremost, and not the victory of one at the destructive expense of others. The question here is not whether or not competition performs a socially useful function or whether or not it is an indisputable fact of life, but more fundamentally how it is that one ought to regard other men generally and one's so-termed athletic opponent more specifically. The keeping of the competitive urge in proper bounds must entail not only the mere observance of rules and regulations (laws), but the genuinely sympathetic regard for others necessary to the elimination of deceit, hatred, and jealousy among athletes, and to the constructive respect for humanity generally.

The spirit of profit and success is coextensive with the spirit of service, if they are both kept confluent with the common good, in which case profit and success are construed in terms of public service. An act is profitable, a person successful, in virtue of it or him contributing to the commonweal. The material welfare of the world is not, then, itself at odds with essential morality, though it is rather clear that an unsatisfactorily inequitable distribution, or treatment, of it is. In this preferred condition, self-interest and public interest coalesce and produce a harmony (a synthetic unity) among men, which is unknown when they are conceived in exclusive terms, or independently of one another. If all compete in the end for the same thing, which may be mutually held, the great cleavages between men dissolve, as Professor Keating admits. The difficulty here, and that to which the substance of our response to Professor Keating speaks, arises from a general conception of the world which allows the rival, the other or others, to be construed as means to an end, and not as ends in themselves, thereby promoting a view of man which serves principally to divide particular men irreconcilably, and which is potentially destructive of the whole of humanity, let alone athletics. This instrumental treatment of other men comes in large measure to regarding them as empirical objects to be employed in the service of our own egoistic satisfactions and aspirations, and is at utter odds with Kant's exhortation: "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only."<sup>2</sup> Each man is hereby regarded as a free moral agent, and not a mere object bound to, and thereby exploited by, the self-interested desires and inclinations of others. The use of men to produce ends beyond, even alien to, themselves is, so it would appear, self-destructive of them, in the sense in which it requires of them an action which is contrary to the cultivation, even preservation, of their human distinctiveness and integrity.

Our rivals are perhaps best conceived not as other men, but as standards of excellence to which we are assisted by other men (our so-termed opponents). The ends of such a quest are exclusive in only a superficial sense. That is, they provide the necessary constraint to excellence which allows one to achieve that

which he seeks foremost, self-fulfillment, or an acting in accord with the common good (a transcendence of exclusivity, a bringing of the self-interest to one with the common good, a unification of all ends). Contrary to what superficial inspection may have led us to believe then, the victory sought is not a victory over, so much as a victory with, others. Consequently, we may most properly be said to be competing against others for an exclusive prize only in terms of our unreflective, or superficial, apprehension of the character of athletic competition. In terms of the larger scheme, the whole, of things and the normative preferences reported here, Professor Keating's notion, if raised to all-embracing (metaphysical) perspective without further modification, leads us to a distasteful, a self-destructive view of man, the social substance, and the common good; and nothing well-disposed, it seems, can be said to actively favor its own demise. This objectionable view, in effect, refuses to allow other men the humanistic regard we seek openly for ourselves. There is, then, as James suggests, no sufficient reason to hold that the destructive, military form of competition is its only, nor its last, form:

Patriotic pride and ambition in their military form are, after all, only specifications of a more general competitive passion. They are its first form, but that is no reason for supposing them to be its last form.<sup>3</sup>

## II

In his discussion of the attitude and conduct proper to playful activity (a free, creative activity in which the goal of the participants is to maximize the joy of the moment, seeking no good outside the activity itself) and that appropriate to athletics (physical contests designed to determine human excellence through honorable victory in a contest), Professor Keating argues that these forms of activity are radically different in terms of their objectives, that the nature of the activity (its goal, or objective) determines the attitude and conduct appropriate to it, and that the attitude and conduct proper to playful activity cannot therefore also be suitable to athletics. But his treatment here appears to proceed on an equivocal notion of competition, and in the case of athletic competition leads once again to a potentially self-destructive view of man, the social substance, and the common good.

It would appear that Professor Keating wishes to regard the competitive motif as located in playful activity as an essentially cooperative venture in which the participants in the end seek a mutually obtainable goal (namely, the immediate joy of all participants) and which is therefore dominated by a spirit of generosity and magnanimity. This process is not productive of listless competition, Professor Keating argues, but is rather the source of an arduous competitive undertaking. Apparently, however, the competitive theme as located in playful activity differs from that appropriate to athletics in three very crucial ways.

First, in the case of playful activity, competition is an intermediate involve-

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ment; that is, one of interest only in terms of that which it allows beyond itself, namely, a heightened joy and pleasure for all disputants. It functions in this instance as a means to achieving a yet more venerated end. And in the case of athletics, conversely, it appears to function as an end in itself. Second, since playful activity generally may include particular activities which are in no evident manner similar to athletic forms of competitive activity, even in phenomenal appearance (e.g., stamp collecting, reading, and the like), the competitive strife itself appears altogether accidental to playful activity, while a necessary condition for athletics. And third, competition as construed in athletic terms is not consonant with the ends sought for playful activity; such that, the sort of so-termed competition appropriate to playful activity is not competition in the strict sense at all. That is, in playful activity, we have a so-termed competitive endeavor conducted in accord with the form and spirit of a cooperative enterprise, or an activity which is not essentially competitive at all; that is, an activity in which exclusive ends are not sought foremost. In point of fact, then, competition in its athletic form is so radically different from that appropriate to playful activity that the two phenomena are not properly signified by the same term. For, insofar as the activities are both genuinely (in the same sense) competitive, and we are not operating under an equivocal notion of competition, they are essentially the same, at least with respect to their competitive aspects, and we have seen rather clearly that they are not. Such a use, consequently, comes to an equivocation with respect to the term, competition.

The distinction proposed by Professor Keating between athletics and playful activity is, in effect, a discrimination between two radically different ways of regarding activities which may be similar in phenomenal appearance, but are necessarily discrete in essence, in terms of their goals, or objectives (the primary intentions of their participants). What we have here as well, then, it seems, is the germ of two radically discrete manners of conceiving man, the social substance, and the common good—two inclinations which are so clearly and distinctly different as to be incompatible. That is, the principles supporting these two codes of moral conduct are so incongruent as to oppose one another. It is not a mere difference in degree, but one of a substantial sort. Professor Keating's case may be more effectively argued, it appears, by opting for one of the two general conceptions, for a hybrid form of one of the two views, or for a thorough reconciliation of them. We cannot tenably regard other men both as the strict competitive notion would have us, and as the strict cooperative notion (competitive in only a superficial sense, as suggested previously: competitive only in the sense in which one is constrained by some thing in his quest for excellence, and therefore has no free, cavalier path to its realization) would suggest. As per our discussion in Section I, then, we conclude that the cooperative notion native to playful activity is the one which ultimately yields the most appealing general account of man, the social substance, and the common good. For, it is a conception which yields not merely a jurisprudential justice,

but one of a spiritual order; and is therefore preferable to its major alternative.

Sportsmanship, when regarded as the moral category appropriate to playful activity, and to the whole of life, becomes the all-embracing moral principle Professor Keating holds that it is not. It becomes one with the sentiments of generosity and magnanimity proper to all forms of human activity. The moral qualities absolutely essential to the sportsman are resultantly those absolutely essential to all humanity. The application of sportsmanship to athletics, then, is not so much an attempt to soften the force of the competitive struggle as it is an attempt to reorder and reform it.

It has been the intent here to offer a brief critique of James W. Keating's "A Philosophy of Competition and the Nature of Athletics." Clearly, issues have been more so raised than resolved. Nothing has been set to rest absolutely. If this attempt has done no more than provoke thought with respect to notions alternative to those expressed by Professor Keating and to the larger consequences of his view, then it has likely achieved all that might be plausibly expected of it.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>James W. Keating, "A Philosophy of Competition and the Nature of Athletics." Essay presented at the Symposium on Sport and Ethics, Brockport, New York, October 26-28, 1972, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Lewis White Beck (trans.). Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1959, p. 47.

<sup>3</sup>William James, "The Moral Equivalent of War." *Pragmatism and Other Essays*, Joseph L. Blau (ed.), New York: Washington Square Press, Inc., 1963, p. 398.

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