

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Martial Competitiveness: Unity and Disunity

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### Abstract

Taekwondo sparring tournament participants, like other athletes, are often described as being *competitive*. In this paper, I perform a conceptual analysis of what this concept might entail. It is easy to doubt that any unifying definition of the term can be found, given the variety of different psychological make-ups that can all be labeled *competitive*. I argue that a unifying definition can, nevertheless, be found: a competitive person is one who strongly desires to do a certain activity better than others also doing that activity. Ultimately, however, even this definition is not very useful, in that our notion of competitiveness is too vague and ambiguous to be used to predict or explain behavior in Taekwondo or other sports.

**Keywords:** competitive, explanation, disjunction, necessary, sufficient

### Introduction

At a typical Taekwondo tournament sparring competition, it is not unusual to hear coaches make statements to each other along the lines of, “Eric’s roundhouse kicks have more power and grace; but Lance is more competitive, so I think Lance is more likely to win this match.” As a former NCAA athlete, sports fan, and the parent of sons who do martial arts, I can attest that the notion of competitiveness is usually a standard part of the conceptual tool kit that coaches use for understanding and trying to improve their athletes’ performances. Athletes also tend to think about their own competitiveness and that of their opponents to try to make sense of, and thus improve on, their performances. The notion is also very common in the way sports writers and fans try to understand athletic contests (22).

Nonetheless, a bit of reflection shows it is hard to say which quality our concept of competitiveness really refers to. In the example above, has Coach A told Coach B that Lance will be happy only if he is dominating the match, or has he told him that Lance is scrappy and enjoys contests where he faces an uphill challenge? Does Lance’s competitiveness make him confident and cool, or high strung and agitated? Does he try to match blow for blow or does he come to life largely in decisive moments? Is the coach commenting on Lance’s obsessive analysis of his losses, or does he think he is a fighter who does not feel bad

about losses, but is inclined to proudly brag about his wins? Does this competitiveness manifest itself as a tendency to continually kick as hard as possible, or does he continually try to play it safe to try to absolutely ensure against losing? Does he want to be better than everyone, or is he extremely focused on certain rivals? The adjective *competitive* can comfortably cover any of these inclinations or any of combination thereof.

In this paper, I argue that despite its apparent multifaceted nature, our notion of competitiveness does have a sort of conceptual unity: a competitive person is one who strongly desires to do a certain activity better than others also doing that activity. But I also want to argue that, despite this unity, knowing that a Taekwondo athlete is competitive tells us very little. Competitive is a term which covers a family of what are actually a number of different sorts of mental states. Moreover, even if one were to know that a person often enters into a particular type of competitive state that does not tell us much about when they will or will not enter that state or what kinds of actions they will try to take. The notion of competitive may be one that is in nearly every athlete’s conceptual toolkit. It is a much more unified notion than it appears. Yet, it is not actually a very useful conceptual tool.

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## Methods

To understand what our concept of competitiveness amounts to, I employ the kind of traditional conceptual analysis that has been used by philosophers since Plato (21). To analyze a concept, philosophers typically start by proposing a plausible defining set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the concept's application. They then try to find cases or *imagine logically possible* cases where that definitional criteria is met, but that seem *not to intuitively count* as true instances of the X concept, showing the need to narrow and tighten the proposed criteria. This is called finding counterexamples. The analyzer then looks at what is lacking in that scenario and tries to see which criterial properties would need to be added to the definition to prevent things that do not intuitively seem to be X's from counting as X's in a revised definition. At the same time, conceptual analysis tries to find cases or imagine logically possible cases where that definitional criteria is *not* met, but which seem to intuitively count as X's; thus, illustrating the need to *broaden* the proposed definition of what counts as an X. Eventually, after making a series of new proposals and using thought experiments to test wider and narrower proposals, philosophers arrive at a definition that intuitively seems to cover all and only X's (or, at least quite close to all and only). They believe, at this point, that they have now uncovered what the term X really means in our language. As in transformational linguistics, it is generally assumed that the intuitions of all competent speakers on such matters should be highly similar (11). (I am sympathetic to critics' worries that it is important, if possible, to try to demonstrate that this is actually the case.) In this paper, I have used this conceptual analysis method to uncover what we mean when we call a Taekwondo athlete *competitive*.

## Discussion

### *The defining criteria for competitiveness*

When someone speaks of a Taekwondo competitor's competitiveness, she is clearly talking about some kind of mental state of the athlete, but which sort of state? In the example above, we see that a large array of different mental characteristics can all be present in athletes we call *competitive*. Which properties are the ones that are essential and that without which the person should not really count as competitive? Sports psychologist Rainer Martens writes, "Competitiveness is defined as a disposition to strive for satisfaction when making comparisons with some standard of excellence in comparison in the presence of evaluative others in sport" (16). Gill and Deeter define

competitiveness as "The desire to enter and strive for success in sport achievement situations" (9). Sports writer Micky Shaked writes, "Competitive drive is one of those intangibles that you just know when you see it" (22). Given the broad way competitiveness seems to be defined in the academic literature and given the diverse array of different kinds of mental orientations that that can all be termed competitive, a good place to start is to see whether a very broad definition is in order. We should consider whether it is sufficient merely for a Taekwondo athlete to be committed to *one or another sort of performative excellence* in order to count as competitive. Perhaps the drive for excellence might stem from many different sources and take many different forms, but the various people who have some form of the drive can all be said to be competitive.

Such a theory of competitiveness is nicely general, but it is *too* general. Consider the famous Taekwondo Grand Master Sang Kyu Shim, who founded the World Martial Arts Association. A letter writer to *Black Belt* magazine in 1967 wrote of Grand Master Shim, "I also asked why I had never seen him in Black Belt or his students in competition. He only smiled and said, 'Too busy training.' His students had absolutely no desire to compete or give exhibitions. They trained three and four times a week and that was all" (23). If we ask, just knowing of this dedication whether he was competitive, we would have to say that we do not know. While Grand Master Shim or his students may have been competitive, this dedication by itself does not indicate whether they are or are not. This clearly shows that dedication to performative excellence alone *is not* sufficient to qualify someone as competitive. Indeed, there is a long tradition in the martial arts of emphasizing the pursuit of excellence while de-emphasizing what we would intuitively think of as competitiveness (10).

Let us consider a more restricted definition. When we talk about an especially *competitive match*, we mean one that is exciting because the outcome remains indefinite for as long as the contest goes on. In an especially competitive contest, we do not know who will ultimately prevail until time is called. Perhaps a *competitive person* is one who really enjoys being in highly *competitive matches*. A competitive person, in this view, is a thrill-seeker who is most happy when he is neck and neck with a competitor.

There is no doubt that there are many competitive people who are edgy thrill-seekers like this. However, a bit of reflection shows that desiring that contests be close is neither necessary nor sufficient for being competitive. We would not, for example, say that a Taekwondo contestant who racked up a larger number of points, but then did not block certain kicks in order to ensure that his opponent's final score was close to his would, in virtue of that making-it-close behavior, count as competitive. The mere

desire for close contests cannot be sufficient for competitiveness. Such a desire is unnecessary, since we also can perfectly well imagine a hard kicker who would be quite happy to knockout an opponent in the first seconds as competitive. One can be competitive without desiring or appreciating close contests.

Let us consider, then, a more lenient definition. Perhaps what makes someone a competitive person is not his love of close contests, but his love of contests. A competitive person, in this view, is simply one who likes to be in competitions, even if his skills are considerably above or below his rival. The example of Bobby Riggs in a 1973 episode of the TV sitcom *The Odd Couple* comes to mind. In this show, Riggs seems to relish leaping into a series of challenge matches with Oscar and Felix, involving everything from wastepaper basket shooting to note holding, without seeming to care much if he won or lost.

Even this more lenient definition, however, is too restrictive. We can perfectly well picture highly competitive people who *dislike* contests immensely. Perhaps for such people, it is extremely important that they be favorably compared to others if such a comparison situation arises. Indeed, it is so important that they *actively avoid* situations in which they might be unfavorably compared. Such people, in other words, so desperately want to avoid *losing* a contest that they avoid contests altogether. They are people who dislike contests, but they do not intuitively lack competitiveness. It is easy to imagine Taekwondo sparring specialists who long to quit competing in tournaments, but feel that they cannot compete for one or another reason. Such jaded athletes may still be fierce opponents in the ring. Their desire not to be in contests does not make them uncompetitive.

Reflecting on the scenarios just described, though, does suggest a simple way of defining competitiveness in a person: a competitive person is one who strongly desires to do a certain activity better than others also doing that activity. Such a person might like or dislike being in contests. He might most savor a win by an inch or a point in the last second, or might be filled with anxiety if not dominating. It is the strength of the desire to be superior and not anything else that really differentiates competitive from non-competitive people. Other things equal, the stronger the desire, the more competitive a Taekwondo athlete is.

This desire is a (near) necessary condition. I can think of no cases where we would intuitively consider someone competitive without their desiring to do some activity better than their competitors. A borderline case might be someone who strongly wants to do better than his or her own past self. This is a desire many Taekwondo instructors have considered extremely important for students to possess. But, in this case, the past self is treated just like another competitor, and the spirit of the

definition is met. Likewise, a man determined to swim the English Channel may be incredibly motivated and driven, but if he is not comparing his time with those of past swimmers or his own past self, merely having the desire to do the training it takes to make sure he can cross the Channel does not make him competitive. He might well happen to be competitive, but this set of desires does not make him so.

A Taekwondo master who proudly demonstrates his ability to break many boards is not thereby competitive. We would only intuitively consider him competitive if he desires to break more or thicker boards *than other masters*. This desire is also nearly sufficient. I can think of no case where someone is wanting to do some activity better than someone else in which they are not being competitive, at least for the period of time they feel that desire. Our concept of a competitive person, then, is actually a more restricted well-defined concept than it might seem from the many different kinds of attitudes it applies to.

Might we restrict the definition even more? Perhaps truly competitive people do not just desire to win, but want to prevail in a fair contest with *worthy* opponents. A bit of reflection says that this further restriction would be unwarranted. It may well be that people who are competitive in this way are especially virtuous, but having this attitude is not required for being competitive. Some readers may remember the episode of the sitcom *Seinfeld* where the middle-aged Kramer boasts of looking inside, finding his Kutra, and emerging as *dojo* (Japanese for martial arts training hall) champion. When it is later found out that he was fighting nine-year-olds, he says testily, "We're all at the same skill level, Jerry." A person like Kramer, or a track veteran who enjoys winning races against beginning runners, is not automatically *uncompetitive* by virtue of being quite happy to have unworthy opponents. Indeed, think of the bully character in the original *Karate Kid* movie who would do what it took to win, even if it meant cheating: Johnny Lawrence and his companions' willingness to cheat to win does not make him intuitively uncompetitive. Competitiveness *can* make someone a better athlete and be a factor in improving one's character, enabling one to be all that one can be. However, virtuousness is not required for competitiveness, and competitiveness, a psychological rather than an evaluative description, can lead one *away from* as well as toward fair competition with worthy opponents. Competitiveness is simply the strong desire to be better at an activity than others.

### *Vagueness and ambiguity regarding competitiveness*

When someone calls something by a term that has necessary and sufficient conditions, we often have a clear sense of what the person is saying about the named thing. Yet, there is still

room to wonder how useful the term *competitive* is. One family of problems has to do with the vagueness and ambiguities in the notions of *desire*, *better*, and how large a quantity *strong* is.

### Varieties of desire

One problem with defining competitiveness as a desire to be better than others is that this definition inherits all the ambiguities of the term *desire*. Different philosophers have long pointed to different fundamental ideas of what we mean by a desire. In my view, three different views of desire are especially important when thinking about sports competitiveness. We need not make a judgment about which one is really what desire is. It is perfectly appropriate to think of them all as different sorts of desires. The problem is that we often do not know which sort of desire someone is talking about when she speaks about competitiveness.

One way of defining desire is in terms of *phenomenal feeling*. In this sense of desire, people desire something when they feel certain emotions about it. A person desires X if he feels pleasure in such a state in which X is satisfied and/or the thought of it being attained. He might feel displeasure when it is not. He might feel a sense of longing for that state (18). Several different feelings can qualify as constituting desire in this phenomenal sense. In this sense of desire, competitive people who desire to win are ones who feel things like great happiness when they win or great sadness when they lose. Their feeling of longing to win tends to be intense. Thoughts of losing can make them extremely anxious. For instance, Jeremy Giambi might be a gutsy base runner, but in the movie *Moneyball*, he is depicted as having little desire to win on the basis of his carefree dancing in the locker room after a big loss.

How such feelings translate into behavior is a complex matter. A Taekwondo competitor, who is very competitive in the sense of feeling devastated after a loss, might nevertheless do little to improve her chances of winning while or before she is sparring. She might not even *feel* any urgency during the contest itself; the strong feelings could come after. Another contestant who is very anxious about losing during a contest might have bursts of adrenaline that make her perform better, or he might be paralyzed with fright and perform much worse. Sometimes, then, when people talk about athletes being competitive, they are talking about *various types of feelings* athletes have before, during, or after a contest. We need to remember that different types of feelings can count as competitive ones, however. The relationship between competitive feelings and behavior is a complex one, and we need to be clear that competitiveness in the sense of phenomenal feeling competitiveness is different from other sorts of competitiveness.

Someone with a strong desire to win nevertheless need not *feel* anything in particular. A desire to be better than others, like a desire for anything, might be identified with a tendency to *judge* that some state affairs is desirable (20). There are subtypes of this genre as well. A desire for X can be a judgment that X is what one should have. It can be a judgment that X is preferable. It can be a judgment that X is very good. Phenomenal feelings of longing, pleasure, or pain are not required for there to be a desire in this sense. A competitive desire, in this sense, is a judgment that doing something better than one's opponents is highly preferable, or desirable, or good. LeBron James' original willingness to leave Cleveland after reasoning that he could never win an NBA championship there revealed him to be a highly competitive basketball player. If James turned out to be totally lacking in normal human sentiments, he would be no less competitive.

The relation between judgments and behavior is as complex as the one between feelings and behavior. Someone's sincerely stated preference for winning big at all costs does not tell you she has the emotional or physical mechanism required for doing anything that would help her win. Nevertheless, even a person whose heart is not into it might well calculate, say, that becoming a world Taekwondo champion would be preferable to being anything else she can think of. The desire for this over other careers would make her highly competitive in a certain sense.

More likely to tell us about what a person will actually do is desire in a *dispositional* sense. According to the dispositional theory, one identifies someone's actual desires with what they act to try to get (1, 25). In this view, a runner who insists he is not competitive, yet speeds up whenever someone tries to pass him, reveals himself as actually being quite competitive. People who do various things to try to win are competitive in this sense, no matter what they happen to feel emotionally or what they say is important to them. Knowing that an athlete is competitive in a dispositional sense will, unlike the other senses, tell you that he will do various things to try to win. Still, by itself, this will not tell you which sorts of things. He might speed up her activity or strategically slow down. He might do things that increase or decrease his pain level. What he will do depends on many other factors, some of which we will look at below.

Hearing that someone is competitive at X, then, we learn that she strongly desires to do X better than others also doing it; but we do not know the sense in which she desires this. Is it a claim that she will feel great disappointment if she loses, a claim that she *believes* that losers are terrible people (whatever she happens to *feel*), or a claim that she will radically change her behavior to avoid losing? A claim about someone's competitiveness could imply any of these, and even if we know which sense of desire is meant that does not mean we know

which subtype it is. If we learn that someone is competitive in the phenomenal sense, does that mean he has butterflies in his stomach before the contest or is full of fury during it? Even if we know the subtype, the link between competitiveness and behavior of any sort is tenuous enough that we do not know what to expect. People can mean different things when they say that someone has a desire or goal. Saying that someone has a desire to be better at an activity than others inherits all of these ambiguities.

Such ambiguities also create problems when trying to figure out which of two people is more competitive. When you have highly different senses of desire, trying to figure out who has the greater desire can be comparing apples and oranges. Someone who is more competitive in the phenomenal sense of desire is someone who feels a more intense longing to win or perhaps feels more elation at winning. Someone who is more competitive in the judgment sense believes that winning is more important than other competitors think it is. Someone who is more competitive in the dispositional sense does more to win. For some, this means a greater variety of offensive moves; for others, it means they will endure greater pain. Ben might be more competitive than Ken in feeling much worse about losing a Taekwondo sparring match, while Ken is more competitive in the sense that he desires to be a superior fighter much more than Ben does. Who is the more competitive fighter, Ben or Ken? Saying that Ben is more competitive does not tell us much about his respective mental states, let alone his behavior.

### *Ambiguities regarding quantity*

There is another important ambiguity in claims about competitive people who have more desire to win than others. Which type of amount is it that is being discussed? Someone who is more competitive than another is generally doing more thinking about being better than others or doing more things that directly help bring about her being better. There are, of course, innumerable different sorts of things that a competitive person might do: move faster, move more deliberately, or endure more pain (of which there are many different sorts). Yet, doing *more* of such thinking or acting might mean doing them with greater frequency perhaps before, during, or after a contest. *More competitive* could also mean that when such thoughts or actions do occur, they occur for a greater duration. It could also mean that the feelings are felt more *intensely* or that the actions are done with more energy.

The legendary *Judoka* (Judo practitioner) Masahiko Kimura could be said to have a high quantity of competitiveness, because he trained for combat nine hours a day, believing that would help him win against others who trained for six hours daily (14).

The mixed martial arts fighter Gilbert Yvel might be said to have a different kind of high quality of competitiveness, as his longing to win is so intense he has been disqualified from matches for eye gouging and biting.

A different measure of quantity is the *number of different types* of thoughts or actions aimed at winning. This use of multiple means to try to win is one of the things people have in mind when they talk about the competitiveness of athletes like basketball player Magic Johnson. Magic Johnson is said to have been a highly competitive basketball player partly because he would employ so many different means of play to try to win a game. The authors of the *Encyclopedia of the NBA* write:

He dazzled fans and dumbfounded opponents with no-look passes off the fastbreak, pinpoint alley-oops from halfcourt, spinning feeds and overhand bullets under the basket through triple teams. When defenders expected him to pass, he shot. When they expected him to shoot, he passed. (19)

Great as his passes were, he was also a great shooter, inside and outside. He was also a good rebounder and defender. Johnson's competitiveness manifested itself in the fact that if one technique did not work, he was willing and able to try another to ensure his team won. A Taekwondo sparring specialist might be said to be similarly competitive in that he will do what it takes to win. If his side kicks are unable to fell an opponent, the fiercely competitive athlete might switch to back kicks; if back kicks are ineffective, he could switch to axe kicks; if those kicks do not score, he may switch to spinning roundhouse kicks. Note that this type of quantity of competitiveness, which centers around the use of a number of different techniques used to win, can be quite different than what people are referring to when they call someone competitive who only throws dozens of reverse punches in a Taekwondo match. Different kinds of quantities can be manifestations of competitiveness.

Still another way to think about a large quantity is not in terms of numbers, but of percentages. Someone might be said to be very competitive if she spends most of the time outside of matches thinking about winning them. Only very non-competitive people spend much time *during* a competition not trying to win or not trying to avoid losing.

A different sort of percentage quantity for competitiveness is the percent of one's other desires or resources one is willing to give up in order to get ahead of others. A person's spending 90 percent of her income on private lessons from a fourth degree black belt Taekwondo instructor might be a sign of great competitiveness, perhaps greater than that of a wealthier opponent who spends twice as much money albeit a smaller percentage of their income. Mickey Rourke, who for years gave up a successful movie career to concentrate on winning amateur

boxing matches, could be said to be more competitive than someone who was not giving up any percentage of something else he cared about to win matches. These examples, too, are quite different kinds of quantity of desire than intensity or diversity of ways of trying to achieve.

### *Vagueness of "better"*

Another source of vagueness in the definition of a competitive person as one who strongly desires to be better than others is the vagueness of the concept of better. One nice feature of most sports is that the rules of the sport generally make it very clear what it is to be better at that sport than someone else. The better golfer is the one who finishes with the fewest strokes. The better Taekwondo sparring competitor is the one who gets the most points in a sparring match. What is vague about saying that a competitive person wants to be better than another is that this leaves open *how much better* he wants to be. Some competitors strongly want to dominate and even humiliate their opponents and win by large margins. Others feel that a win is a win, no matter how slim the margin of victory is. Indeed, for some, winning by a slim margin feels more satisfying. People who very much want to be better than their opponents can be satisfied with different degrees and kinds of *better*.

### *A more fundamental ambiguity*

To each of these sources of vagueness and ambiguity, we need to add or highlight another sort. A competitive person has a desire (of various sorts) that is strong (in various ways) to achieve a win (by various amounts). However, competitive also applies to a desire (of various sorts) that is strong (in various ways) to avoid a loss (by various amounts). Many competitive people, no doubt, both love to win and hate to lose; but it is quite plausible that some people are primarily oriented toward one or the other. Some people's competitiveness comes from an attachment to the thrill of victory, while for others it comes from a determination to avoid the agony of defeat. There is no reason to think that a victory-attachment and a defeat-avoidance need always be the same psychological mechanisms. A competitive person might have both, but she may also solely or primarily have one or the other. This means that even if all competitive people have a psychological desire to be better than others, the desire to win can take very different forms in people with distinct victory-attachment or defeat-avoidance mechanisms. This divergence is there in addition to all the ones discussed above and thus introduces a further lack of clarity in what we know when we say someone is competitive.

If we say starkly that competitiveness is either loving to win

or hating to lose, competitiveness looks clearly to be a kind of disjunctive property. An interesting thing about disjunctive properties is that there is a broad consensus within academic philosophy that they do not exist. The philosophical literature is full of arguments and examples aiming to show that there really are no disjunctive causes (2, 3, 15). One of the most prominent anti-disjunctive arguments is given by philosopher Jaegwon Kim. Kim asks us to consider this explanation of someone called Mary's pain:

Rheumatoid arthritis causes painful joints.

So does lupus. Mary has either rheumatoid arthritis or lupus.

Therefore, Mary has painful joints.

Says Kim:

Do we have here an explanation of why Mary is experiencing pain in her joints? Do we know what is causing her pains? I think there is a perfectly clear and intelligible sense in which we don't as yet have an explanation: what we have is a disjunction of two explanations, not a single explanation. What I mean is this: we have two possible explanations, and we know that one or the other is the correct one but not which it is. What we have, I claim, is not an explanation with a disjunctive cause, "having rheumatoid arthritis or lupus." There are no such "disjunctive diseases." (13)

Now compare Kim's example to this explanation of Mary's intense kicking in a Taekwondo sparring match:

An attachment to victory causes intense kicking. So does an avoidance of defeat. Mary has either an attachment to victory or an avoidance of defeat. Therefore, Mary kicks intensely in her match.

If Kim is right, then competitiveness—being either an attachment to victory or an avoidance of defeat—should not be any more of a property that is able to cause anything than arthritis or lupus. This kind of disjunctive disunity seems to make it impossible for competitiveness to be a bona fide causal property or natural kind. Whatever makes people act like they do in athletic competitions, it is problematic to claim that one of the things that does it is a disjunctive property.

Now one might wonder whether competitiveness manifested as either an attachment to victory or an avoidance of defeat is not just a good example of a multiply realizable property—a property which can be instantiated in two different ways. Most philosophers think multiply realizable properties are important bona fide properties of a certain sort although a growing minority do not (4, 5, 12, 19, 17, 26). Yet, they also think that disjunctive properties are different than mere multiply realizable ones. Jerry Fodor writes, "There's a difference between being a functional property (being multiply realized) and being a disjunctive

property” (7). Fodor and others have numerous complicated arguments about what the differences consist in (e.g., there are no “independently certifiable” laws about disjunctive properties). Here, we only need to note that competitiveness as an attachment to victory or an avoidance of defeat seems analogous to a pseudo kind like jade, which is really either the mineral jadeite or the mineral nephrite. Jade is now widely regarded as not being a true mineral kind at all because of its disjunctive nature. There really is no natural kind as jade. As such, according to the current philosophical consensus, there is only jadeite or nephrite. If the arguments about disjunctive properties like jade not truly existing are correct, should that not mean that competitiveness does not really exist for the same reasons?

For reasons we need not go into in any detail here, I am unpersuaded that we have principled ways of separating disjunctive properties from multiply realized properties—or from any kind of properties for that matter. I do not think we have a sufficiently clear understanding of what a property or a realizer really is to be able to say that certain properties are illegitimately disjunctive while others are not. I do not think, then, we are currently in a position to confidently reject a property as being as being non-existent merely because it is disjunctive. We are in no position to say competitiveness does not exist on these grounds. However, what the existence of a difference between wanting to win and wanting not to lose does add is another weighty source of ambiguity into a category already fraught with ambiguities. When we say that someone is very competitive, there are many, many things we can mean.

### *The need for additional information*

When a person claims that someone is competitive, we do not know if 1) which sort of desire to win they possess, 2) if their competitiveness comes from a desire to avoid losing, or 3) in which sort of large quantity this desire comes. Yet, one might think that once we clarify which sort of vague desire we are talking about, it is a small move to infer, from this, what a competitive athlete will tend to do. Some reflection reveals, however, that a very large amount of often hard-to-get additional information is usually required before we can begin to deduce what to expect.

### *Who are one's competitors?*

Even if we were to clarify which kind of desire was being specified, our definition of competitive says nothing about who a competitor wants to be better than are. Some people consider anyone doing the same activity as they are doing to be competitors that they want to be better than. There are

Taekwondo competitors, for instance, who feel compelled to try to kick higher than all the other people training with them. At the same time, there are Taekwondo competitors who are considered highly competitive, but who only care about being better than the contestants in a particular narrow weight and gender division in championship matches. Knowing that someone is competitive in an area will not tell us who they are competitive with, so knowing they are competitive will not tell us, without this further information, what to expect from them.

### *When is one likely to be competitive? – Issues of costs and benefits*

Knowing that an athlete has a certain sort of competitive desire about besting his opponents does not yet tell us when he will tend to have such desires. The presence and strength of any desire is relative to circumstances, resources, and the presence of other goals. It is thus relative to costs and benefits and to awareness of those costs and benefits. While a person's competitiveness indicates that the desire to win will be there many times, without knowing what costs are present or absent, we will not know when his strong desire is likely to appear or disappear.

There are many different sorts of costs of an athletic victory. One simple type of cost is the bad things that can accompany the various good things that come with the victory. A competitor who has won every one of her local matches might not want to win nearly as badly at a regional competition, if winning there means that she will have to endure a very long car ride to a national match with a hated coach. This woman, normally a very competitive fighter, may not feel competitive if the price of winning has what she perceives as a negative obligation that goes with it.

Another type of cost is an opportunity cost: having to forgo some goals or activities in order to satisfy others. A competitor may have had a lifelong ambition to win a certain region tournament, but that desire might disappear upon learning that doing well in Saturday's tournament requires coming home early from an annual school dance.

The adding of any other wants, in addition to or in conjunction with athletic victories, requires resources to satisfy them and can also weaken the desire to win. A Taekwondo competitor, for example, might purchase an expensive new *dobok* (Korean for martial art uniform) that he wants to keep for several years. The new goal of preserving this *dobok* might make him less inclined to do kicks that put him at risk of falling and therefore potentially tearing his *dobok*.

The resources it takes to produce a win are themselves also a kind of cost, a sacrifice. A Taekwondo sparring competitor with a desire to win might suddenly have much less of a desire

if she learns that competing will require her to purchase an expensive strike protector with an electric scoring sensor, or to buy an expensive ticket to an international tournament.

A certain amount of physical pain is also a commonly required sacrifice for wins in many sports. As various sorts of pain increases, the desire to win can decrease. A fighter who is normally very competitive might not merely do worse after a wrist injury; he might have much less desire to win.

It is also true that circumstances that make it more difficult to win also make a win more costly in that more effort and resources will be needed to win in these circumstances. The lowered probability (and therefore increased cost) of winning will likely lessen the desire to win in most rational actors. A competitor who is very good at initiating an attack with a roundhouse kick might find his desire to win a tournament greatly diminished upon finding that he has been assigned an opponent who is very good at countering such an initial attack. With a different opponent, a strong desire to win would still be there. Nonetheless, he knows he does not have the right skill set to win against this opponent. The costs of having to work twice as hard to win are not likely to lead to a payoff victory with this opponent, and the competitor's desire to win will probably be lower.

The relativity of one's desire for something to the costs and benefits of getting it can work in the opposite direction as well. As the costs of winning go down, the desire to win can become strong where it was not before. If the roundhouse-initiating Taekwondo competitor finds that he is assigned an opponent who is notoriously poor at countering such an initial attack, his probability of winning goes way up, the costly amount of effort that it takes to win goes down, and the desire to win will likely go up. Wearing an already torn *dobok* might remove the goal of preserving it, newly freeing a fighter to make additional types of off-balance risky kicks. A trip to the national championships might give the regional champion a chance to reconnect with the guy she met there last year, giving her a drive to win stronger than she ever had previously. Other things can make the benefits of victory greater as well.

Behavioral economists have demonstrated the endowment effect, which is when a person is willing to pay much more to keep an object that they have been given, than they would to acquire the same object (6). Because of this endowment effect, we should expect that a Taekwondo competitor would be much more motivated, if he has built up a lead and feels like the victory is already his whatever the desire to win might be in other circumstances. Someone whose desires to win are huge in one set of circumstances might be quite small in a somewhat different set. This makes saying that someone is a competitive person not tell us much about when they will be competitive even if

competitive has clear necessary and sufficient conditions and is disambiguated.

The dependence of the presence and strength of a desire on cost and benefits, which can differ in different circumstances, is one of the reasons that someone's level of competitiveness can be different before, during, and after a contest. A Taekwondo competitor's desire to win might be very strong before she starts the match (or before she starts seriously training) and realizes all the sacrifices that must be made and how much pain must be endured in order to win. The desire to win beforehand might also be low, on the other hand, if she overestimates the costs. Her desire to win might be low at the start of a match, but then increases steadily when she sees how good she feels and how few costs there are to winning. A feeling of euphoria after winning a match contest can lead her to dream of the next contest and the next win. Finding that the win yields no acolytes from friends, on the other hand, could leave her feeling uninterested in winning again. Are such athletes competitive ones? It can depend on the different costs and benefits contestants become aware of at different phases of the contest.

### *Knowledge, ability, and performance*

If we do not know an athlete's abilities, it is hard to tell about his desire to win; a desire which is partly dependent on how costly he thinks a win will be for him, given his particular talents. However, an athlete's talents affect what knowledge of his competitiveness can tell us in other ways as well. When all is said and done, the main reason we want to know about an athlete's competitiveness is because we want to know what he tends to do in an athletic contest. When an athlete is competitive, we know that he wants to be better than the others. In the dispositional sense of desire, we know that he will do various things to try to be better than others. But what things will he do? Sports are, of course, built around the idea that we do not know the outcome of someone's attempts; but without our knowing what things an athlete knows how to do, and his ability to do them at some level of competence, we cannot even know what kinds of activities he will try. In sports there are generally many different ways to best your opponent, but we will have little idea of what kinds of things a very competitive athlete will attempt to do unless we know something about the idiosyncratic skill repertoire of that particular athlete. Without this additional knowledge, knowing that an athlete is highly competitive will tell you very little about what to expect from him.

This additional knowledge, however, is hard to come by. For one thing, such a skill repertoire can be expected to change constantly. As athletes train, they generally get better. As they compete against others, they also know more about what works

and what does not, and should change what they do and do not attempt accordingly. As athletes age, they eventually get worse. As they get more worn down in a season or a match, they get worse (though not very predictably or systematically). All of these changes can occur while their desires to win stay constant. This means that even an accurate report of someone's competitive desire to win, even after being disambiguated in multiple ways, cannot be combined with just general background knowledge to tell you what sorts of things we can expect from an athlete in a given contest. Consequently, again, knowing someone's level of competitiveness will not tell us much about what we can expect him or her to try to do.

## Conclusion

The term *competitive* is frequently thrown around by sports mentors and coaches to warn contestants about what to expect from their opponents. It is used by fans of all sorts of sports to talk about styles of play to expect from athletes. Taekwondo competitors are no exception. I have argued here that this term tells us little. *Competitive* is merely a general umbrella term that covers a family of what are actually a number of different sorts of mental states. Moreover, even if one were to know that a person often enters into a particular type of competitive state, that knowledge does not tell us much about when she will or will not compete, or what kinds of activities she will try to do. One might object that few people expect this term to tell us much about an athlete's performance. I disagree. I believe that people continually use this term in hopes of conveying a fair amount of information about how athletes will respond to the various sorts of challenges they will face in contests. But even if it turns out that people are well aware of how little information is conveyed, what I hope to do in this paper is explain why it tells us so little.

Some terms are not very informative, because we can find nothing like necessary and sufficient conditions for their application. Wittgenstein (29) famously argued that the term *game* covers an enormous range of things, and that there was no single feature that all games had in common. When we know only that two people were playing a game, we do not know much about what they were doing. Wittgenstein may or may not have been right about games (24, 27). Nonetheless, I have argued that, even if he was, this is not the problem with competitiveness. There are close to necessary and sufficient conditions for competitiveness. Competitive people necessarily want to be better than others at some activity. If someone strongly wants to be better at an activity than the others doing it, that is sufficient for him to be competitive. We do know some definite things

when we know someone is competitive. The uninformative nature of the word *competitive* comes from other sources.

One set of problems stems from the ambiguity and vagueness of a number of things about the definition regardless of its having necessary and sufficient conditions. When we know that someone has a strong desire to win, this leaves an undesirable level of vagueness concerning the type of desire, the type of strength of that desire, and the amount one desires to win by. The other set of problems comes from the amount of additional hard-to-obtain information we still need to have, even after clarifying the various sources of vagueness. Before we know what to expect, we need to know who a person feels a desire to beat, when winning actually becomes a goal as well as when it is deemed not worth it, and what kind of knowledge and talents that person has.

If I am correct that competitiveness is a desire to do better than others at a certain activity, this has important consequences for sports psychologists. Some sports psychologists measure something other than this when they measure competitiveness. Gill and Deeter, as stated previously, define competitiveness as "The desire to enter and strive for success in sport achievement situations" (8). Competitiveness, for them, is a concept revealed by a factor analysis that they could later measure and study further. My conceptual analysis research indicates that something may well have emerged in factor analysis, but there are strong reasons not to call that something competitiveness. Gill and her colleagues had a choice about what to call their factor and chose the name competitiveness, because it seemed to fit a group of traits clustered in a certain way (9). My research indicates that this is a poor choice of names. In Gill and her colleagues' writings, competitiveness is a broad trait, distinct from a desire to win (9); but our ordinary concept of competitiveness, explicated by the conceptual analysis method of looking at examples and counterexamples, indicates that the desire to win is just what competitiveness is. A desire to succeed in some or other sense is not sufficient. In addition, a desire to enter into contests is not necessary since, as we have seen, a competitive desire to win, along with a lack of confidence, can make people not want to enter competitions. Scholars studying something other than the desire to win are studying something other than competitiveness.

If I am correct that desire to win is an ambiguous phrase that can cover many different mental states, then the desire to win is not something we should focus on when we want to understand athletic motivation and performance. If scholars want to study something specific and concrete, competitiveness is not what they should study. Fortunately, many scholars studying sports psychology do indeed study much more clear and specific motivating factors than competitiveness. In their review article

on sports motivation, Weiss and Chaumeton discuss the work of a large number of sports psychologists on such things as extrinsic orientation, mastery orientation, ability orientation, ego-involved goals, outcome-orientation, social approval-orientation, and participation motivation. These features all seem more fine-grained and well-defined than our ordinary concept of competitiveness. As Weiss and Chaumeton write, "in contrast to early theorizing about achievement motivation as a unitary construct...each of these contemporary theories considers achievement motivation as multidimensional in nature" (28). Many sports psychologists, then, seem to implicitly realize that talk about how competitive an athlete is does not convey much useful information about her. I believe that the sport of Taekwondo would benefit when its coaches and competitors realize this as well. Despite the conceptual unity of the concept of competitiveness, the term does not do us much good. Taekwondo coaches and athletes would be better off talking less about athletes' general competitiveness and more about their particular physical and mental skill sets in particular situations.

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