

Athletic Enhancement, Human Nature and Ethics

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Athletic Enhancement, Human Nature and Ethics

Threats and Opportunities
of Doping Technologies

 Springer

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Preface

Technology and Sport, Meanings and Realities

Read this book only if you want your cherished ideas to be challenged and your intellectual horizons to be expanded. Whatever your convictions about sport, human nature, and enhancement technologies, you are sure to find arguments here that will puzzle and possibly offend you, as well as ones that provide fresh insights into the assumptions underpinning your own beliefs. Your views may change, or not, but you will have a far sharper understanding of the range of positions once you've engaged with the ideas presented in this book.

Along the way you will witness concepts such as human nature and the natural, as they are deployed in the enhancement debate, get a good cuffing, but also some sympathetic and sophisticated defenses. Misleading labels such as “bioconservative” and “techno-progressive” make their appearance, but for the most part the authors in this volume attempt to explain what they mean by them rather than using these terms as a lazy, dismissive shorthand.

An exercise I recommend is to take careful note of how different authors use or define the idea of sport. Is their focus exclusively or predominantly on elite sport, or do they include the multitudes of people around the world—likely in the hundreds of millions if not more—who engage in some form of sporting activity? Is their concern limited to formal competitions or does it encompass informal and non-competitive athletic endeavors? Do they provide insights into or at least a clear presentation of their own views on the purpose or meaning of sport? You may find, as I did, a wide range of ideas from sport as joyful play to sport as a method to establish hierarchies of genetic superiority. You will have to decide which portraits of sport are most compelling, which capture most fully your own experience as athlete, parent, spectator, or critic.

One tension, inescapable in a scholarly volume of this type, is between abstract theoretical analysis and immersion in the particulars of whatever practices or institutions are under investigation. You will find a spectrum of approaches in this book, some chapters tilting heavily towards the theoretical, some striving mightily to

sustain the tension, and a few with a strong empirical bent. Each approach has its virtues, though I confess to a preference for analyses that embody a deep understanding of the realities of sport—born no doubt from my experience at The Hastings Center where the mantra “good ethics begins with good facts” is a fundamental precept. A key word in that mantra is “begins”: the hard work of ethical analysis is profoundly informed by what we learn about the underlying realities, but the search for insight and practical wisdom can be difficult and challenging.

Imagine we are talking not about sport but rather about music. Scholars can legitimately analyze music as sequences of sounds of particular frequencies and intervals. They can represent those sounds by symbols written according to the notational conventions of whatever system they employ.

Representations such as these can reveal interesting patterns. But they may not be the best way to capture all the richness of the music—the experience of playing, singing, dancing or listening; how some music is joyful, even transporting and rapturous. Like sport, one’s experience of certain forms of music such as jazz, classical and many other genres, is enhanced the more one participates in and understands it. Music can also be unsettling and challenging—think 12-tone—and earn its value that way.

Of course, music can also be utterly dull, uninteresting, boring, listlessly performed or electronically produced. Autotune is an enhancement technology of sorts in that it corrects a singer’s errors of intonation. It can help make a pop star out of someone barely able to carry a tune. (The skills that matter most here appear to be in marketing, public relations, and hairstyling rather than musicality.)

A formal analytical structure may struggle to capture such nuances, but it is in such details that we are likely to find what makes particular forms of music, particular performances, important and moving in our lives. Such theoretical structures may also have difficulty explaining why anyone should care about music. What is it that motivates us to play, sing, dance, and listen? If we desire to understand what gives music its meaning and human significance, we are well advised to attend to the experiences of performers and audiences.

The same is true of sport. One of the first things one learns from a close look is the limit of sport as a test-bed for how cultures receive new technologies. Sport can be quite perverse. As much as we welcome in most of our activities technologies that make us more efficient, or that correct our errors (such as spell-check, with its occasionally hilarious results), sport often prohibits them, from golf balls that fly overly far and straight to motors on bicycles in the Tour de France. We can only make sense of such perversity if we grasp what meanings and values people find in that sphere of human endeavor we call sport.

Technologies that sport may choose to prohibit as unwanted enhancements may be quite acceptable, even ethically preferable, in other spheres. Imagine a drug that steadies one’s hand. It may be banned in sports such as archery and biathlon; but if it improved surgeons’ ability to perform delicate operations without notable risk to the surgeon’s health we might well expect that good surgeons would no more think of operating without taking this drug than they would not bother sterilizing their instruments. We need to look to the meaning and values within each sphere, along

with the particulars of the candidate enhancement technology, if we wish to understand how to deal wisely and fairly with each purported enhancement.

A second, equally crucial insight one learns from attending carefully to the realities of competitive sport is the complete inadequacy of a libertarian individualistic framework for analyzing the ethics of enhancement in sport. The pallid abstraction of “positional goods” points in the right direction, but it captures only weakly the stark reality athletes face when they compete against others who gain a palpable advantage from a drug or other technology. A drug that provides a five percent edge trumps a three percent advantage in talent and dedication. An individual’s decision to use a performance-enhancing drug affects everyone he or she competes against. Given the realities of competitive sport, the libertarian view is in effect tyrannical: if some athletes are free to use drugs, just about all athletes who hope to compete at that level will be obliged to do the same or else consign themselves to frustration and failure. That, at least, is what I’ve learned from listening to athletes.

You will find much to agree with, much to disagree with (including from this Preface). But when you read this book you will gain abundant insights and your understanding of sport, technology, and human nature will surely be enhanced.

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Thomas H. Murray, Ph.D.

Acknowledgements

New technologies with the potential to enhance athletic performance present scientists and practitioners with important moral choices and call upon ethicists to help identify and elucidate values like health, freedom and fairness and even more fundamental concerns like human dignity and human nature. Interdisciplinary collaboration and international networking is needed to deal with such broad and deep challenges. To assist that process, the newly created Interfaculty Research Group Sport and Ethics of the KU Leuven, together with the Bioethics Institute Ghent, organised the seminar *Enhancement and human nature in medicine and sport* (Leuven, 18 March 2011), the papers of which constitute the core of the volume at hand. In the following months several other authors submitted papers to complete and enrich the book *Athletic enhancement, human nature and ethics: Threats and opportunities of doping technologies*. Significantly, the interdisciplinary scope and the human nature focus seemed to arouse a lot of enthusiasm. No less than three international meetings created opportunities to meet colleagues, negotiate contributions and discuss the nature of the book. These were consecutively: *Philosophy of sport in Europe*, the first conference of the European Association for the Philosophy of Sport (EAPS) in Prague, 19–21 May 2011, *Human enhancement: medical, ethical and legal implications*, the Brocher-Hastings Center Summer Academy on the ethics of human enhancement in Hermance (Geneva), 4–8 July 2011 and the *Anti-doping. Rational policy or moral panic* conference at Aarhus University, 18–19 August 2011, organized by the International Network of Humanistic Doping Research (INHDR). The editors welcomed these opportunities and owe thanks to the organisers and to many colleagues among which Mike McNamee for his ever inspiring ideas. All these contacts and efforts resulted in the present compilation of original papers, presenting a sustained, multi-faceted analysis of the most foundational questions about human nature, humanity and natural talent as challenged by doping. The editors Jan Tolleneer, Pieter Bonte and Sigrid Sterckx and the members of the editorial committee, Andreas De Block and Paul Schotsmans,

thank all the contributors and collaborators and hope that the book will play a significant role in the wider understanding of athletic enhancement and in the on-going process of interdisciplinary research and social debate with a view to ever more ethical and aesthetical sports. Last but not least, we express our deepest gratitude to Dr Julian Cockbain for his careful and thorough language editing of the entire manuscript.

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