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The use of performance-enhancing technologies in sports through Nicolas Agar's "truly human enhancement" approach

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will present Nicholas Agar's "truly human enhancement" approach, which is aimed at critiquing pro-enhancement approaches that advocate for the utilization of technology to better the human condition. After identifying some limitations of Agar's approach, I will apply it to sport in order to explore what kinds of enhancing-performance technologies should be allowed in it. In doing so, I will focus on two criteria from Agar's account that could be deployed to determine when it would be morally condemnable to utilize performance-enhancing technologies in sport, namely intrinsic goods and veridical engagement.

1. Bioethics, human enhancement, and sport

The ethics of the use of technology, especially biomedical technology, to enhance human nature is one of the most discussed topics in bioethics. Despite not being a new issue, interest in it has increased considerably in the last twenty years because of the remarkable progress in biomedical sciences and genetic engineering. The theoretical positions on this matter range from unrestricted endorsement to complete rejection. Proponents of the former are called "pro-enhancement defenders" and advocates of the latter are referred to as "bioconservatives." Although the debate is often presented in terms of the opposition between these two extreme approaches, most bioethicists seek a middle ground between them (Clarke, Savulescu, Coady, Giubilini, & Sanyal, 2016).

Because enhancement is commonplace in sport, bioethicists and sport ethicists regard sport as a micro-cosmos of society, or as a "moral laboratory" (Culbertson, 2008; McFee, 2004; McFee, 2012), to evaluate the ethical implications of using performance-enhancing technologies. For instance, Thomas Douglas points out that sport is "one of the first testing grounds for enhancement technologies, for anti-enhancement regulation, and for public reaction to enhancement" (Douglas, 2007, p. 3). A recent example of the utilization of sport to provide a moral evaluation of human enhancement is Nicholas Agars' *Truly Human Enhancement: A Philosophical Defense of Limits.* There, to identify and explain the main tenets of his prudential argument against certain human enhancement technologies, Agar utilizes two sport examples. One is a fictional runner enhanced to run a sub-hour marathon. The other is Deep Blue, the computer that IBM develop to beat the best chess player in the world at the time, Gary Kasparov.

In this paper, I will center on Agar's bioethical account of human enhancement to explore the connections between the key concepts in his "truly human enhancement" approach and those in the ethical debate on the use of performance-enhancing drugs in sport. In doing so, I will first provide a description and critical analysis of Agar's account, identifying its main strengths and limitations (Sections 3 and 4). One of these limitations relates to Thomas H. Murray's claim that the human enhancement debate "is deeply dependent on context [and must be adjudicated] by elucidating the values that are sought in or served by that sphere of human endeavor, and by the meaning ascribed to that sphere by people who participate in it." (Murray, 2014, p. 193). Following Murray, I will argue that, in order to make a solid case against (radical) enhancement in sport, Agar's account must be complemented with an interpretation of the particular nature of sport. As Agar does not offer such an interpretation, mainly because his goal is not to morally adjudicate the utilization of performance-enhancing technologies in sport, I will draw on the ethics of sport literature to provide such an interpetation and will connect it to his approach (Section 5).

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2. The use of technology in the history of sports, a moral justification for performance enhancement?

2.1. Technology is commonplace in professional sports

In sport ethics, the pro-enhancement view advocates for the use of performance-enhancing technology in professional sports. According to proponents of this view, not only has performance enhancement been ubiquitous in the history of professional sports, but it is also intrinsic to their nature. Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century sport theorist and historians, such as Dr. William Penny Brookes and E. N. Gardiner (Young, 1984), regarded ancient Greece and Victorian England as two golden ages of sport, in which athletes did not use performance-enhancing substances to gain a competitive edge.

Recent historical studies, however, have dispelled the myth of the existence such doping-free eras. In ancient Greece, athletes experimented with substances like goat testicles, raw meat, and hallucinogenic mushrooms (Bahrke & Yesalis, 2002). Likewise, English Victorian athletes used coca leaves, cocaine, alcohol, and strychnine. One of the best-known examples of amateur doping use in the nineteenth century is Dorando Pietri's victory in the 1908 London Olympics marathon; journalistic chronicles of the competition openly describe how Pietri's support team administered him strychnine and alcohol during the race (Gleaves & Hunt, 2016).

For pro-enhancement advocates, performance-enhancing technologies are intrinsic to competitive sports, especially when played at an elite level. According to Kalevi Heinila (cit. in Møller, 2016), professional athletes' emphasis on victory places high demands and pressures on them. To cope with such pressures, athletes must rely on teams of experts that control every aspect of their performance, including training methods, artificial substances, diet, and equipment. Given athletes' intimate relationship with expert teams and technology, Heinila notes, athletes must not be regarded as the sole determinant of sport performance. Rather, their performance must be seen as the result of the interplay among individual effort, support networks, and technology. From Henila's perspective, thus, performance enhancement technology is not alien to sport but constitutive of it.

In a similar vein, Dennis Hemphill points out that today's sport environment is shaped by expectations, norms, and incentives that promote and normalize the use of performance-enhancing technologies. Athletes are socialized into a culture in which reliance on technology and expert knowledge provided by coaches, physiologists, doctors, psychologists, nutritionists are common practice (Hemphill, 2009, p. 321). In such an environment, the decision to rely on technology is not viewed as radically different from that of other performance-enhancing means. Rather, it is regarded as "a part of the job." In this regard, Hemphill argues:

> From their earliest involvement, athletes begin to internalize two very powerful messages of high performance sports: first, that success is equivalent to high performance; and second, that the achievement of high performance is at least in part a function of reliance on forces [...] outside of oneself. When combined and repeatedly reinforced [...] they very well may predispose an athlete to employ [any technology] as merely one among the many external forces deemed necessary for success (Hemphill, 2009, p. 321).

2.2. The use of performance-enhancing technology is a defining element of sport

Pro-enhancement advocates Savulescu, Foddy, and Clayton (2004) and Tamburrini (2000) take the close relationship between sport performance and technology even further. They regard sport, using Hoberman's words (2014), as a "Nietzschean enterprise" whose main goal is to provide a site for transcending human limitations. For Hoberman, the effort to overcome limitations by drawing upon the strength of mind and body is at the heart of sport: "a theme that unifies the athletics of ancients and moderns: removal of virtually all restraints on the development of athletic powers—physical culture's version of Promethean ambition itself" (Hoberman, 1997, p. 294). The Nietzschean "will to power" is, on this view, the defining attitude of athletes, for they turn the will to overcome limitations into their attitude towards life. From this perspective, the use of performance-enhancing technology is instrumental in helping athletes intensify their effort and improve their physical abilities to further the main goal of sport, that is, the overcoming of limitations.

Understood in this way, performance-enhancing technology becomes an instantiation of the essence of sport. For instance, according to Savulescu and collaborators, performance-enhancing technologies should be banned based on two criteria: safety and the spirit of sport (Savulescu, 2016, p. 302). The latter criterion, according to them, comprises two elements. One is the preservation of the human character of sport; the other is the protection of the test of particular skills or strength. When viewed in light of these two principles, Savulescu and collaborators posit that not all performance-enhancing technologies are morally problematic. Some of them align with the human character of sport and facilitate the development of skills and strength. For instance, in "A doping manifesto," Savulescu argues:

> The US cyclist Tyler Hamilton, who in 2011 confessed to doping, achieved second place in one stage of the 2002 Giro d'Italia with a broken shoulder, coping with the pain by grinding his teeth. His reward was caps on 11 of those teeth. When he switched to blood doping, he noticed a remarkable phenomenon. His body felt the same screaming pain and exhaustion that marked the end of his physical reserves. But when he pushed on, he found he had more to give. His increased hematocrit (red blood cell count) was no easy ride. It simply gave him the ability to physically achieve more miles by continuing at the very edge of what he could mentally endure. That takes a courage and commitment that very few have. (Savulescu, 2014).

According to Savulescu, technology does not create athletes. Rather, it helps them develop their skills. For instance, steroids and blood doping enable cyclists to train harder in order to take their skills to higher levels. Regarding the undermining of the human component of sport, Savulescu is also skeptical about the negative implications of performance-enhancing technology. For instance, in "Why we should allow performance enhancing drugs in sport," a joint publication with Bennet Foddy and M. Clayton, Savulescu argues:

> Far from being against the spirit of sport, biological manipulation embodies the human spirit—the capacity to improve ourselves on the basis of reason and judgment. When we exercise our reason, we do what only humans do (Savulescu et al., 2004).

In line with this, Savulescu advances: "People should have the freedom to be better. Apart from grave risks, the other reason to ban human enhancement is because it alienates us from something valuable and human—the so called «spirit of living»" (Savulescu, 2016, p. 303). Thus, far from undermining the essential human component of sport, performance-enhancing technology provides athletes with a site to exercise and develop their "human spirit."

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