

OF CABBAGES AND KINGS:CONTINUING CONVERSATION ON PERFORMANCE ENHANCERS IN SPORT

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"'The time has come,' the Walrus said,
'To talk of many things:
Of shoes -- and ships -- and sealing-wax --
Of cabbages -- and kings. . .'" (5: 235)

My focus in a recent essays has been on the use of performance enhancing drugs in sport. I have suggested the appropriateness of establishing a philosophical-cultural context within which to develop parameters for proscribing certain behaviors in sport (6), and, most recently, I have considered the use of performance enhancers as sufficient to warrant a (re)consideration of the question whether philosophy has anything meaningful to say to ordinary people (7). This question articulates both a traditional invitation to philosophy to actively rethink its nature, role, and understanding of the philosophic task, and a more specific challenge to philosophy to address current issues determined to be significant by the non-philosophic community to which philosophers have some obligation to respond. One of the immediate stimuli for this question is a perceived inconsistency between anti-doping positions defended on a certain ordinary or common sense level and concerns about doping proscriptions as articulated on a certain philosophic level. One can defend a negative answer to the question of (the possibility of) philosophically meaningful contributions to common sense discussions if the question is posed in a typically rationalistic way, articulated within a traditional Enlightenment conception of philosophy in which the emphasis is placed on the logical rigor and internal consistency of the analyses provided. An affirmative answer can be defended only from within a refocussed perspective on philosophy in which the emphasis is placed on the social dialogue character of our reasoning in order to provide a "validating context" through which we might change the ways in which we think about our subjects. A successful refocussing of this type would result in the reinvigoration of practical wisdom as a philosophic goal.

In this essay I extend some of my earlier reflections. I will begin by describing the perceived inconsistency between common sense and philosophy on questions of doping, and then suggest one response thereto. I will conclude by suggesting that a continuation of the Socratic conversation is both appropriate and philosophically substantive.

One of the questions philosophers of sport (and other scholars working in interdisciplinary areas) feel compelled to address is the "practical value" of their philosophic reflection. While certain philosophic investigations, those labelled 'metaphysical,' perhaps, are accepted as intrinsically valuable and those engaged in such investigations are not expected to demonstrate real world applications for their work, such is not the case for philosophers of sport. Philosophers of sport, rightfully, are expected to extend their reflections from the hallowed halls of ivy to the playing fields, to demonstrate the relevance of their scholarship to real situations. Issues arising from doping in sport provide an especially dramatic arena for applied philosophy. There is no disputing the significance of the doping question. The use of

performance-enhancing substances and/or techniques in sport is a substantively provocative issue. Our investigations and conclusions can be expected to have major consequences for our understanding of the nature of sport, our acceptance or rejection of certain behaviors in sport, and on the methodology and argumentation we employ to these ends.

The following presentation is deliberately oversimplified and selectively articulated, and to that extent incompletely characterizes the complexity of some basic philosophic issues. We may nonetheless begin from the assumption that cheating in sport is generally wrong. We have no difficulty agreeing both that certain behaviors are examples of cheating, and that these behaviors are thus wrong. Accepting motorized transportation for a portion of a marathon, for example, violates those constitutive rules of the activity that require the entire race distance be covered on foot. Since constitutive rules are violated thereby, accepting a ride is cheating. On a quite ordinary level, we understand such behavior as wrong, and we expect competitors who are caught riding to be disqualified.

Does the use of (at least certain specified) performance enhancing drugs or procedures by an athlete also constitute cheating?¹ On the same commonsensical level just indicated, the answer seems clear: the use of performance enhancers is cheating because it violates constitutive rules of the activity. Since such use is cheating, it is wrong and we should expect the disqualification of competitors who are caught doping. This conclusion is established through a simple and straightforward argument. Cheating is the deliberate, knowing, and voluntary violation of certain constitutive rules in order to gain a competitive advantage. Since the violation is knowing, the attempt to gain an advantage is illegitimate and unethical, and the advantage sought is thus unfair. The knowing and voluntary use of proscribed substances is an attempt to gain such an unfair advantage. Some specified performance enhancers, anabolic steroids for example, are listed as proscribed substances in certain sports. The deliberate use of steroids is thus an illegitimate attempt to gain an unfair advantage. We conclude that their use is cheating.

On a certain philosophic level, however, the question is not whether steroid use violates the rules, since it is commonly known that steroids are proscribed substances and that their use, thus, is cheating. The philosophic question concerns why steroids are on the list of proscribed substances in the first place. Why should doping in sport be considered unacceptable? Recent attempts to answer just such questions have resulted in a variety of philosophic analyses of sport, drug use, and cheating, through which we have discovered that very complex issues and convoluted analyses are involved, some results are rather more problematically established than first thought, and some answers do not speak to our common sense concerns.

Attempts to justify substance proscriptions are conveniently differentiated into four categories predicated on the focus of the arguments developed. Arguments typically address the alleged “unfairness” of the advantage to be gained (3,8), the likelihood of harm to or the potential dehumanization of the user (4,9,14), the possibility of coercion of non-users (15,17: 65-74), or the possibility of perverting sport (16). Irrespective of differences in focus, however, these arguments all to share a common deficiency: even the most promising are less than convincing as justifications for current proscriptions, and stand in need of additional philosophic development.

We are now presented with an uncomfortable dilemma: to renounce our cultural, common sense expectation that philosophic conclusions should not be inconsistent with our common sense, or to reconstitute our understanding 'of the nature and role of philosophy. A brief caveat is in order here. I am concerned with a commonly perceived inconsistency between public or cultural expectations regarding drug use in sport and the Philosophic attempt to justify the proscriptions themselves. This clearly is not a simple inconsistency. The public expectation is simply that drug use in sport is wrong because it violates the rules. Drug users are cheaters who should be subject to appropriate sanctions. The philosophic question is raised at an entirely different level: that of justifying the proscriptions themselves or justifying the rules by which cheating is determined. Since the levels of argumentation and the goals sought thereby are quite distinct, there is no simple logical contradiction or inconsistency involved on this point. There is, however, a level of public understanding, perhaps to be considered a lowest common denominator expectation, on which subtleties about levels of philosophic argumentation are irrelevant. If the public understands that drug use is cheating, and professional academic philosophers cannot (or will not) develop arguments to support such a conclusion, then the philosophers are suspect.

The suspicion in such cases operates and must be addressed on at least two quite different levels. On an immediate level, the philosopher's obligation in extending the results of scholarship to the public arena is to present those results in language easily accessible to the public audience. This is a challenging obligation in this age of "professionalized, dispersed, fragmented, minutely specialized research," one too-common result of which is the alienation of the scholar from the rest of humanity². Philosophers should respond to this aspect of their obligation by making every reasonable effort to present their findings in common speech. On the other hand, this is a substantive challenge to philosophers to reinvigorate their analyses of philosophy in response to the originating question as asked above. Since I will return shortly to some issues associated with determining the level of public or common understanding to which philosophers have an obligation to respond, it is sufficient here to note that the inconsistency at issue is a matter of cultural perception, not (straightforward) logical error.

The dilemma itself is a result of a destructive dilemma argument. If we maintain that certain performance enhancing substances, such as steroids, should be prohibited, then either we will have to proscribe a number of other, currently acceptable, substances that have not been shown to be logically (or ethically) different from steroids, or we will have to demonstrate logically (and ethically) significant differences between these substances and steroids. To date, we have been generally unwilling to prohibit additional substances currently accepted for use by athletes, and we have been unable to demonstrate significant differences between these substances and steroids. Thus we cannot maintain that (only) certain substances, such as steroids, should be prohibited. This conclusion articulates an apparent practical dissonance between the commonsensical understanding that steroid use in sport is cheating and wrong and the philosophical position that we cannot justify the proscriptions of those substances.

What logically is at issue if we accept the position that steroid prohibitions are not justifiable? Has philosophy indeed strayed away from common sense on this issue? Has philosophy lost its public audience? Two significantly disjoint responses suggest themselves. First, the conclusion that steroid use is not unacceptable (a slightly weaker, and perhaps philosophically more palatable position than that steroid proscriptions cannot be convincingly established) may not follow from our reasoning. Perhaps our arguments are simply not as well constructed as they appear. We may have committed certain errors in our reasoning, which

in turn led us to (these) inappropriate results. If we can discover and correct these errors, we can amend our conclusions. This disjunct itself admits of two interesting permutations. First, the issue here may not be one of fallacious reasoning. Perhaps it is less a question of errors committed than of mis-directed arguments. It may be that the complexity of the issues we have addressed has prevented us from discovering the “right” type of logically acceptable arguments with which to justify steroid prohibitions. Second, it just may be that the problems associated with doping in sport are simply too difficult to admit of philosophic resolution. Perhaps it is asking too much to expect logically convincing conclusions on matters of cultural origin and significance. We may be better advised to reconsider the nature of our philosophizing than to attempt to philosophically resolve the doping dilemma. This recognition is significant. It is tantamount to admitting that the perceived inconsistency between the common sense and the philosophic, at least concerning questions of justification, while not a simple logical matter does in fact pose a substantial challenge to philosophy at a methodological and systematic level. This challenge leads directly to the second disjunctive alternative.

Perhaps the conclusion that steroid use is not unacceptable does follow from our arguments, but is so at odds with at least our “conventional” socio-cultural understanding of the nature and values of sport as to raise serious questions about what we have done philosophically to bring ourselves to this conclusion. This disjunct is much more interesting than the first. If the analyses of arguments against the use of steroids are not logically deficient, a claim I find entirely non-problematic, then the conclusion that such use is not unacceptable does follow from these analyses. But this conclusion seems at least conventionally distasteful, possibly even unacceptable. It has long been part of our conventional sport wisdom both that cheating involves some sort of dishonesty and deception, and that cheating is for that reason wrong. It thus appears our philosophic wisdom is inconsistent with our conventional wisdom. How are to resolve this apparent inconsistency?

Perhaps the dilemma can be mitigated (or even evaded) by escaping between its horns, by rejecting the disjunction that gives the dilemma its awkwardness. Let us grant, following the first and less interesting alternative, that the conclusions about steroid proscriptions do not follow from our arguments. We must also grant that this position does not result from specifiable logical errors that we might identify and correct, in turn establishing the proscriptions at issue. Rather, the force of this alternative is to be found in the wrong-headedness of the arguments, which attempt to deal on a purely rational and logical level with situations and behaviors that can be successfully addressed only from within a philosophical-sociological narrative that accommodates a much broader perspective of philosophic discourse and understanding than that allowed by the Enlightenment tradition. We need to refocus the philosophic perspective through which we think we understand what we are doing logically and ethically to accept and account for the argumentative expectations we share with those sport participants, spectators, and theorizers who are not professional philosophers. One articulation of the requisite understanding of philosophy will be presented in my concluding comments, but we should not underestimate the significance of this point. We may well be better advised to reconsider our understanding of and expectations for our philosophizing than to continue our analytic efforts to “resolve” the doping dilemma.

There is, however, an additional interesting consequence of this suggestion for our second alternative. If steroids are not logically and ethically different from other substances and practices we continue to find culturally and philosophically acceptable in sport,³ if their proscription is unwarranted, let us simply accept them. We would immediately gain the benefit

of no longer having to devote energy to justifying (current) prohibitions on steroid use. We could turn our attention to the more significant and problematic, and ultimately more rewarding, task of reconsidering the nature of philosophy. Additionally, if steroids are no longer unacceptable, decisions about their use will properly rest with the athlete herself, without the artificial constraint imposed by the “fact” that such use violates sport rules. The athlete, that is, will demonstrate rational autonomy through her choices about using performance enhancers. A variety of the commonly presented but patronizing arguments on this matter will lose whatever minimal force they presently enjoy. As free and autonomous rational agents, athletes would exercise their own choice on the relative merits of harm principles, advantages gained and costs incurred, the perversion of their sport, and so forth. Athletes themselves will be free to make meaningful choices about the conditions under which they will compete. Drug-free athletes who choose not to compete against dopers might establish their own drug-free competitions, for example, perhaps modelled after current drug-free power-lifting competitions. Governing bodies would still be responsible for sanctioning competitions, but would identify events as drug-free, drug-enhanced, or open. Various handicapping schemes could be developed that would weight drug-free performances against enhanced performances. Separate categories of records would be established and maintained⁴. Drug-enhanced performances could still be considered cheating, of course, and some drug testing would probably still be necessary. The focus and emphasis of such testing would be much different from the present mandatory, random, unannounced in-season and out testing that demands so much of our attention and resources. Only those competitors registering for drug-free status would be subject to testing. Competitors who acknowledge drug use, or who register for competition in open or enhanced categories, would not have to be tested, and their use of performance enhancers would be unrestricted and would not constitute cheating.

While this suggestion is not entirely facetious, it should not distract us from the question at hand. In the next section of this essay, I present a very brief contextual justification for responding to the doping dilemma, which will then serve to ground a subsequent reconsideration of our understanding of philosophy. John Hoberman has recently claimed that the will to unlimited performance is the central intoxication of our civilization (11). Hoberman’s concern is that many current analyses of “the doping dilemma” are conceptually inadequate because they are constructed without any articulated appreciation of the historical context in which doping becomes a significant issue. His general point is that analyses of doping have been either analytical or historical, developed as mutually exclusive alternatives⁵. Analytic arguments, that is, are developed as logically discrete entities, independent of the historical context in which elite athletes have confronted the question of whether to dope, while historical analyses have tended to be developed in narrative traditions with relatively less concern for the logical rigor characteristic of the analytic tradition. Hoberman concludes that “doping” is a social construct, and the real question is not whether to dope, but whether any limits at all should be imposed on the will to unlimited performance.

Hoberman’s conclusion about doping as a social construct is well-taken, and extends similar suggestions made by Fairchild (6) and Lavin (13). By framing the question in terms of whether to impose any limitations at all, rather than in terms of the logical adequacy of proscriptions, he has neatly obviated specific attempts to justify particular prohibitions. More interestingly, he thereby suggests the context that must be developed in order to answer the specific question. Granting, as we have earlier, that (analytically developed) arguments are philosophically and culturally deficient in various ways, the context in which we must conduct our inquiries must be culturally sensitive and responsive, and still meet publicly accessible standards of philosophic rigor. Specifically, any attempt to voluntarily impose developmental

restraints on performance must arise from a culturally inspired rejection of unlimited performance. Whether such a cultural rejection of unlimited performance is a realistic possibility at this point in our sporting history is problematic. Michael Lavin is pessimistic on this point, unconvinced that we are prepared to work toward developing the relevant consensus through which we might develop a certain revulsion toward (at least some of) the practices accepted as necessary to achieve unlimited sport performance (13). I am less pessimistic, for some of the same reasons I believe Hoberman is less pessimistic. Hoberman suggests the possibility that elite competitors are viewed, both from within sport and from without, almost as “anthropological figures,” elevated beyond the status of normal human achievers to a level of appreciation at which we and they themselves applaud their performances in terms of their specific technical accomplishments. This is an especially intriguing suggestion when we recognize that such a narrowly restricted emphasis on the technical might only be achieved through doping. The concern which allows the development of a culturally warranted revulsion to doping practices is a vivid, although perhaps unarticulated, fear of human self-transformation (11).

This is not a simple fear that through the pursuit of sporting excellence we will explore previously uncharted realms of our humanity, and thus enhance our understanding of “self.” It is a primordial fear that our basic concept and understanding of self, however defined, will be fundamentally and irretrievably altered. Shirl Hoffman presents a similar point, although in an admittedly very different context, in his analysis of the *athletae dei* movement. Hoffman describes what he terms the “cult of Nephilim,” comprised of those who aim for biomechanical perfectibility. We can easily extend Hoffman’s description to include all those athletes whose commitment is to the pursuit of unlimited performance through the exploitation of science and technology (12: 277). Hoffman’s concern is that through this exploitation athletes aim for bodily (sic) perfection, and physical attributes become separated from their whole natures. For Hoffman, this occurs for the *athletae dei* as they seek to become gods.

We need not accept a desire for godliness from our sports exemplars in order to recognize substantive grounds for Hoberman’s fear of self-transformation. A more restricted perspective on self-transformation can be developed in terms of the logic of abjection.⁶ One of the primary aspects of abjection is that the limits and boundaries of the body have been traversed, and that this violation calls into question our fundamental understanding the self. The boundary of the body is traversed through the deliberate, intentional insertion, injection, or ingestion of substances intended specifically to improve sport performance and thereby extend our understanding of human limitations. If the substances re-introduced into the body have been previously removed for that purpose, or are derivative from such previously removed substances, the practice(s) are likely to be culturally revolting. The revulsion we experience both individually and culturally is predicated on a fundamental conception of defilement as that which escapes social rationality and the logical order on which any social aggregate is necessarily based. Specifically, an athlete who uses certain substances that involve “stuff” removed from the body and reinjected for the sole purpose of seeking (unlimited) performance confounds our understanding of the athlete’s “own clean self.” The concept of one’s own clean self is predicated on a fundamental distinction between inner and outer selves, a distinction that often finds primary expression through the body.

We can now return to our initial question of whether philosophy has anything meaningful to say to ordinary people. The answer here is yes, if we are willing to refocus our philosophizing away from the Enlightenment tradition with its emphasis on unrestricted

rationality and toward a renewal of the socratic quest to make sense of our lives -- including those aspects of our lives involved with sport. As we participate in and mold the environments that spawn our concerns and arguments, so we participate in and mold the arguments themselves. As we attempt to make sense of our lives we recommit ourselves to a certain goal of practical (applied?) wisdom. This goal requires that we be willing to address the nature of the philosophic enterprise in which we are engaged even as we develop the contexts and narratives through which we address the specific questions and issues we find significant.

More specifically, the philosophic context within which we focus our concerns and develop our arguments will be meaningful just to the extent it establishes certain normative expectations for our philosophizing and thus for our lives. Philosophy, of course, should say something about the nature of the self, about who we are and who we might become. Our philosophic understanding of issues that concern us, especially those that concern us on everyday levels, should provide some guidelines for how we ought to respond to those issues and about how we ought to live our lives. We still may be unable to construct logically convincing justifications for steroid proscriptions, but we should be able to construct contexts in which our concerns about sport doping are appropriately addressed. This will require a commitment to establishing philosophically acceptable positions that are, at the least, perceived as not inconsistent with socially and culturally warranted positions and expectations.

The significance of this point is found in its similarity to the socratic practice of philosophizing through public dialogue. Good philosophy should rightly be expected to make a practical difference in our lives. Neither sportspersons nor philosophers act in a cultural vacuum. The level of acceptability we seek for our arguments should be philosophically rigorous, accommodating the expectations of our professional colleagues, and yet accessible to and relevant for those non-philosophers who comprise the majority of those interested in understanding and appreciating sport. Our success in this second, dramatically more public arena, will be measured by the extent to which our work (results) meets the intellectual and cultural standards of our community and context. The investigations and analyses in which we become involved must emphasize this social component. They must take place in highly situated, highly structured discourses which at every moment embody the living, dynamic consensus of the community, however broadly constituted.

We might even go so far as to suggest that an emphasis on the social dialogue character of our philosophizing reinvigorates philosophy as a validating context for any number of kinds of inquiry. To the extent that philosophic dialogue so envisioned is accepted as a "rhetoric," the rhetoric of sport might well become the totalizing perspective within which we can meaningfully accommodate the rapidly evolving boundary disputes that seem to have characterized what some postmodernists have described as the end of philosophy.

This refocussed understanding of philosophy is itself a product of the evolutionary development of philosophy, a result of continuing efforts to rethink the nature and goals of philosophy. Its legitimation will be found initially within the humanities traditions in which it is based, obviously, but also within the expectations of current culture. Our intellectual responsibility is to extend our philosophic investigations beyond the specifics of doping proscriptions, beyond the specifics of any of our activities, beyond even self-reflective philosophic analyses, to discovering how things hang together. Resolutions to particular dilemmas will not be more easily developed than currently, but we should find some satisfaction in the progress this position allows, for several quite distinct reasons.

To continue the philosophic conversation begun by Socrates is to recommit ourselves to philosophy as process as much as product. Even if we still arrive at conclusions that are (culturally) uncomfortable even while they are “logically convincing,” we should nonetheless be confident in the process we have enjoyed, and pleased with the enhanced understanding achieved thereby. Recognizing and admitting this type of tension between common sense and philosophy also demonstrates a certain moral courage too often lacking in current confrontations with especially complex issues which admit of no easy resolution. Finally, resolutions to doping issues may yet be forthcoming -- since continuing the conversation requires that we continue to develop and refine issues and analyses, that we continue to address questions we determine are significant.

Socrates’ goal in dialogue, like ours, was to involve and assist others in their own efforts at moral and logical self-improvement. Whether we will be as successful in involving others in our conversations remains to be seen, as it remains to be seen whether these conversations will make any difference in our lives. What is clear is that significant conversations await our participation. We have simply suggested avenues we might pursue for their development.

NOTES

1. The use of performance enhancers includes both substances (such as steroids) and practices (such as blood doping). While proscriptions are typically listed under distinct categories, the types of arguments employed to justify those proscriptions are very similar. In this paper I will use the term “performance enhancers” to refer both to substances and to practices. Moreover, I will use the term “doping” in a general sense to indicate a variety of substances, although the primary referent will be anabolic steroids.
2. Gregory Vlastos has argued this point quite nicely in his recently published study of Socrates as ironist and moral philosopher (19: 3ff).
3. We should remind ourselves that this may overstate our conclusion somewhat. It is more accurate to claim only that we have been unable to establish logical or ethical differences between steroids and other substances.
4. The possibilities here are really quite entertaining. On a conservative, and not entirely facetious, interpretation, a single set of records would be sufficient, but drug-enhanced performances would be identified with an asterisk. On a more radical interpretation, true “world champions” might be expected to hold titles or records won in open competitions against all competitors, or perhaps in both drug-free and drug-enhanced competitions. Elite athletes who are past their drug-free competitive prime could perhaps expect to return to elite competition through the carefully monitored use of performance enhancers.
5. I believe Hoberman’s distinction parallels a distinction I have suggested between philosophic wisdom and Philosophic Wisdom (7). An Enlightenment-based commitment to rational inquiry, without particular regard for the muddled complexities of the everyday world in which most of us have our being, at best restricts, and at worst precludes, the possibility of meaningful dialogue between “ordinary people” and professional Philosophers. The elaboration of this distinction, and its consequences for our understanding of philosophy, is well beyond the scope of the present essay. I will, however, offer some brief comments on this point in my conclusion.

6. My first application of the concept of abjection to sports performance was an attempt to establish a context in which proscriptions on specific substances might be justified (6). Including sport abjection as a subordinate category of a more pervasive fear of human self-transformation allows the possibility of developing several benefits not consequent on my earlier essay. (1) A number of very specific issues concerning substance/practice proscriptions can be addressed substantively without risk of logical circularity or philosophical pedantry. (2) Ideals of sport can be developed that need not address technological issues that currently suggest certain opportunities for the perversion of sport or the perversion of ideals of competition. (3) The logic of cultural/contextual perspectives within which we reexplore the nature and limitations of our philosophy becomes a much more promising avenue through which to raise the level of public discussion and consciousness. Only the third of these possibilities concerns us in this essay, and that only briefly.

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