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Ethics and enhancement in sport: becoming the fastest (human?) being

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ABSTRACT

When considering the use of enhancement in the world of sport, we should contemplate not only the enhancement of particular traits, but also that of the athlete (as a human) as a whole. In most sports, we are interested in comparing the fastest *human* performance and not the fastest *performance*. There can be room for both types of sports, but each will give different expectations, rules, limits, and kinds of participants in the endeavour. This paper argues that the underlying question of what it means to be human needs to be central in the context of enhancement in sport.

Introduction

A 2012 article in *Wired* asked whether the reader would be willing to ‘swap a healthy eye for a bionic one with additional functionality’.¹ In the same way, we could ask whether in the near future, athletes would be willing to swap their healthy natural legs for higher performance bionic prostheses. While it might sound like science fiction, some have already argued that having artificial legs is an advantage.² This is only one of many examples of how the world of sports, and its ideology of *Citius, Altius, Fortius*, is a promising context for enhancement.

In the general debate on human enhancement, it has been suggested that when looking at its ethics, instead of making general arguments *for* or *against*, one should analyse it considering particular contexts (Roduit, Heilinger, and Baumann 2015; Roduit 2016). Indeed, it is conceivable to endorse some sort of enhancement for a specific purpose, in a specific context, while not in another. One could make a case that surgeons should take enhancements to reduce shaking in their hands during surgery, while at the same time arguing against the idea of taking a cognitive enhancer, such as Ritalin, to pass an exam.

In this paper, we wish to examine the ethics of human enhancement in the world of sport, as discussed in a recent congress at the University of Lausanne, ‘*Be disabled, become champion*’.³ For the sake of our argument, we will analyse sport in general, including disability sport. In this context, there is no explicit need to provide two separate analyses

for able-bodied and disabled sport. Nonetheless, this will take us a step beyond a general analysis of human enhancement, which has already been carried out by several authors (Fukuyama 2003; Agar 2004; Sandel 2007); it is in a specific context that we will take a look at human enhancement.

We shall first outline different ethical arguments regarding the ethics of human enhancement in general. We will then use a specific analytic lens, as outlined in a previous paper (Roduit, Heilinger, and Baumann 2015), based on an argument drawn from philosophical anthropology. We shall contend that the underlying question of what it means to be human needs to be central in the context of enhancement and sport. This is essential in order to set limits, without which human athletes might end up competing in sport against non-humans. For instance, in chess and the game of Go, humans have been pitted against computers. But if we think of sports as measuring a human's capacities against those of another human, it is essential to keep the anthropological component central in the debate.

The ethics of human enhancement

Principlism (Childress and Beauchamp 2008) has often been a favoured approach to examine possible ethical problems entailed by human enhancement. Using different principles, authors have built cases for or against human enhancement, and raised important ethical issues, such as questions of *justice*, e.g. Who will have access to these enhancements (Buchanan et al. 2001; McKibben 2004)? Will they widen the gap between the have and have-nots (McKibben 2004)? Other authors have raised questions concerning individual autonomy: Will enhancement be a threat to the latter (Degrazia 2005) or, on the contrary, will it empower people's decisional ability (Schaefer, Kahane, and Savulescu 2014)? Might some of us not be strongly encouraged, if not forced to participate in enhancement practice? Finally, authors have put forward considerations of safety: Might enhancement not have unintended, deleterious consequences (Annas, Andrews, and Isasi 2002; Fukuyama 2003; Sandel 2007)?

This type of approach has enabled participants in the debate to ask important questions. However, this method is of limited scope insofar as it does not attempt to answer the following question: 'What does it mean to be human' in light of human enhancement? This question underscores worries about human enhancement, namely the possibility of enhancing to a point of becoming something other – and maybe less – than human. Sandel (2007) rightly comments:

In order to grapple with the ethics of enhancement, we need to confront questions largely lost from view – questions about the moral status of nature, and about the proper stance of human beings toward the given world... our new powers of biotechnology make them unavoidable.

Last but not least, some authors have introduced 'anthropological' arguments; what does it mean to live a good human life (Parens 1998), or an authentic life (Elliott 2004; Levy 2011; Erler 2012)? Could enhancement constitute a threat to our own human nature (Habermas 2003; Heilinger 2010), leading down a slippery slope to dehumanization (Agar 2014)?

Ideals and enhancement

Of particular interest for our paper is the following question: What are the ideals driving the enhancement project? In other words, towards what do individuals wish to enhance when they strive to improve themselves. In the debate, Agar (2014) distinguishes the

anthropocentric ideal from the *objective* ideal. ‘The anthropocentric ideal assigns value to enhancements relative to human standards’, whereas ‘according to the objective ideal, human enhancements have value commensurate with the degree to which they objectively enhance our capacities’. In the first scheme, human enhancement is about making better humans (holistically speaking). Enhancement can be understood in terms of approaching an ideal of being human: leaving the *contents* of what it means to be human open to discussion, but acknowledging that the *concept* of ‘being human’ is of importance. In the second case, it is about enhancing particular traits, such as intelligence, memory, cognition or health, without any regards to human standards for its moral evaluation (Roduit 2015).

Based on the work of philosopher Mark Walker (2002), Roduit (2015) has made a similar argument, making a distinction between two ideals or driving forces behind enhancements, namely *type-perfection* or *property-perfection* (Walker 2002; Roduit, Baumann, and Heilinger 2014; Roduit, Heilinger, and Baumann 2015). In the property-perfection ideal, enhancement is about properties, without any regard to a given type. For instance, it would be question of creating the best possible intelligence, for intelligence’s sake, without any consideration for a type, such as human intelligence, artificial intelligence, animal intelligence, etc. What matters above all is maximizing intelligence. In contrast, type-perfection asks: What are some essential qualities of a given type towards which we can strive, thereby achieving enhancement? Roduit (2015) has suggested that Nussbaum’s ‘central capabilities’ possess some ‘essential qualities’ of what it means to be human, and could be used to provide some sort of lens or guidance for human enhancement. In other words, when considering ‘human’ enhancement, some sort of definition of ‘being human’ is essential. This approach has the advantage of giving a flexible definition of being human, because Nussbaum’s central capabilities are not set in stone, but open to public deliberation.

As a brief reminder, the theoretical framework of the capability approach was put forward by Martha Nussbaum (2011). It answers the question ‘What is this person able to do and to be?’ Nussbaum suggests a list of ten central capabilities, which are essential for humans. To be deprived of them would be to live seriously impoverished lives (Roduit, Heilinger, and Baumann 2015). These central capabilities are *life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one’s environment* (Nussbaum 2011). In this paper, we are evoking these capabilities in a different context from Nussbaum’s, as essential components of what it means to be human. They may be viewed as ideals to guide human enhancement, without which it would not be possible to decide whether something is an improvement or not (Roduit, Baumann, and Heilinger 2014). In other words, to decide if something is an enhancement, we need an ideal that can not only guide enhancement practice, but also serve as a normative reference point. Nussbaum’s central capabilities are quite helpful in this context.

The ethics of human enhancement in sport

Enhancing traits or enhancing the athlete

When considering the enhancement of athletes and/or disabled athletes, we should not consider enhancing particular traits *only*, such as speed, strength, etc., without considering a holistic approach to human enhancement. In this context as well, the same underlying question applies: ‘What does it mean to be human?’ In other words, sport is interested in comparing the best *human* athletes, and not the best *athletes* whether human or not. We

need, therefore, to take into consideration what it means to be human, which will help to set limits to human enhancement.

If an athlete is interested *only* in becoming the fastest *being* alive, without any regards to who she/he might become, (in other words, without an anthropocentric ideal or to type-perfection) then why not become something other than human? If the athlete is *only* interested in enhancing particular traits, in this case speed, without reference to what it means to be human, then he/she might as well become a cheetah. While this can be a surprising analogy, similar examples have been given regarding life-extension (Agar 2014). We know that some species can live longer than humans. So, if we value *only* the enhancement of a particular trait, namely life-extension, would that mean that we should try to transform ourselves in order to become like this other species? On the other hand, if we value the enhancement of the human as a whole, life-extension will need to be considered in light of what it means to be human, in light of the central capabilities outlined by Nussbaum (2011).

On the other hand, if the athlete's goal is to become the fastest human being alive, enhancement will have some limits that are given/informed by our anthropology (what it means to be human). This philosophical anthropology does not need to be 'set in time' (essentialist), but can change over time, as can the central capabilities.

However, in the world of sport, many ideals or type-perfections may be at work. While Agar (2004) and Roduit (2015) introduced only two kinds of ideals (objective and anthropocentric for Agar, property-perfection and type-perfection for Roduit), there may exist different ideals for different sports. The essential properties required to become the best sumo wrestler differ greatly from the properties required to become the best swimmer. Different disciplines define different type-perfections, or at least they give more information regarding which enhancement will be beneficial in which context.

Nonetheless, if we keep in mind the larger picture that both the sumo wrestler and the swimmer are not only athletes, but also part of the 'human' type, we will be able to apply the general framework given by the central capabilities approach. If we do not consider the type designated as 'human', we could surely decide to genetically modify and enhance a swimmer with some bionic fins and artificial gills. In other words, without the limitation of a given anthropocentric ideal or of a type-perfection, we will focus only in enhancing particular traits that would provide an advantage in a given sport's discipline, and we will end up with an athlete that would no longer be human.

As mentioned elsewhere,

[T]he ideal human that individuals are striving towards when using human enhancement should at a minimum retain the ten central capabilities; a form of human enhancement should harmoniously maximize those capabilities as a whole. In a practical context, other specific capabilities are added to the central capabilities so that human enhancement can be evaluated within this framework. For example, if one wants to become a great basketball player, then she should have some other specific capabilities. Those specific capabilities, however, should not limit the central ones. This provides a safeguard against what might appear to be a human enhancement, but may actually instead be a diminishment. If a particular capability is increased (e.g. becoming taller to play basketball), this might affect negatively central capabilities, (i.e. becoming so physically altered or unusual appearing that it makes it difficult to relate [capability of affiliation] with the world). (Roduit 2016, 33)

However, we already watch sports competitions that do not involve humans or involve humans against non-humans; we are no longer dealing with a human sport, where humans compete against one another, but rather some sort of cyborg sport, post-human sport,

animal sport, or human vs. artificial intelligence sport. Nonetheless, it seems that at least for the time being, we are more interested in watching human competing against human, than human competing against some other animal. Then again: are we primarily interested in the *human* doing the performance (according to their type-perfection/anthropocentric ideal), or are we interested only in the *performance* (according to property-perfection/objective ideal)? There can surely be room for both types of sports, but they will surely involve different expectations, rules, limits and sorts of participants. The two different contexts will also have two different answers regarding which enhancements would or would not be permissible.

Becoming the best human boxer vs. becoming the best boxer

How would the above approach apply to a particular sport? Let us consider the hypothetical case of Judy the boxer. Seeking to possess some advantage over her opponent, Judy decides to enhance a particular trait without considering the underlying question of what it means to be a *human* boxer. She has no time for philosophical inquiry about human nature. Understandably, she only wants to become better at her sport. What matters for her is enhancement of a *property*, without any consideration of a *type*. Judy thinks that being compassionate towards others and being afraid before a competition have been disadvantages for her. In an effort to enhance herself, she decides to take some sort of drug to reduce her fear and performs some mental exercises to detach herself from seeing other people as humans. If she wants to win, she needs this sort of enhancement.

We can see how reducing her fear and her compassion can be viewed as an enhancement from Judy's perspective, and more specifically, in this particular context, from a *property-perfection* perspective. However, if we use the approach suggested in this paper and elsewhere (Roduit, Heilinger, and Baumann 2015), we can see that from a *type-perfection* (or *anthropocentric ideal*) point of view, this is not human enhancement. Using the grid provided by the central capabilities, we see that Judy might put her *bodily health* at risk, but more importantly, she erodes her *emotional* capability and her capability of *affiliation*, as she might no longer be able to relate to other human beings. Thinking from a *property-perfectionist* view that she was enhancing herself, we can see that from a type-perfectionist view, she might become something other than human. She might become better at punching people, but she will not become a better *human* boxer.

Towards what do we enhance?

Finally, one advantage of considering different ideals when thinking of enhancement in sport is that they provide a point of reference or a goal to guide human enhancement. Indeed, when the goal of enhancement in sport is *Faster, Higher, Stronger*, the questions according to what? and compared to what? need to be raised.

As mentioned elsewhere,

[I]f one considers becoming taller only in comparison to a given former state without regard to an end-point, the enhancement is only a quantitative change. It does not follow that such a change is an improvement. On the other hand, if one takes an ideal approach, the goal and ends of human enhancement become central factors guiding the evaluation. If one undergoes a height-adding enhancement, for example, out of a desire to become a better basketball player, the enhancement can be considered a qualitative change, once the intervention is positively evaluated in reference to the ideal of what is required to be a better basketball player. (Roduit, Baumann, and Heilinger 2014)

Conclusion

In conclusion, when considering enhancement in sport and/or in disability sport, we have argued that the underlying question of what it means to be human needs to be considered. For some, enhancement is about enhancing traits only, without consideration to a given type such as an anthropocentric ideal or a type-perfection. If we were to apply this approach to the world of sports, we would end up with competitions trying to evaluate different traits or property only. We would end up with swimming competition comparing which being could be the fastest being in the world, without consideration as to whether this being is human or not.

On the other hand, if the athlete's goal is to become the fastest human being to swim a given distance, enhancement will have some limits that are given/informed by our anthropology (What does it mean to be human?). This anthropology does not need to be fixed for once and for all but can change over time, as suggested by the capabilities approach of Nussbaum (2011). That is one reason why we have argued that even – and especially – in the world of sport, it is important to keep in mind some underlying fundamental questions regarding philosophical anthropology.

Notes

1. <http://www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2012-09/04/seeing-beyond-human-transhumanism>.
2. https://www.ted.com/talks/aimee_mullins_prosthetic_aesthetics?language=en.
3. <https://www.unil.ch/issul/fr/home/menuinst/evenements/evenements-2015/colloque-sport-et-handicap.html>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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