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## Chapter 4

# Dignified Doping: Truly Unthinkable? An Existentialist Critique of 'Talentocracy' in Sports

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### 4.1 What Doping *Is* – And What It Need Not Be

#### 4.1.1 *The Need for Rigorous Intrinsic Inquiry*

In the spirit of this volume, this chapter seeks to cut to the chase of the doping debate. Having picked the thick cluster of doping-related problems apart, many scholars conclude that the problem posed by performance enhancing interventions runs deep, and that this depth is not adequately probed by addressing the many acute circumstantial problems they pose, such as health risks, rule-breaking, unequal access, direct and indirect coercion, abuse in perfectionist and hypercompetitive cultures, etc. (for two sustained analyses, see President's Council on Bioethics 2003: 101–158; Sandel 2007: 25–44) The World Anti-Doping Code recognizes that doping does not only pose such circumstantial issues which are ultimately remediable – at least theoretically so, even if they might prove to be intractable in practice. Doping is seen as wrong *in and of itself*. In this vein, the Code's Fundamental Rationale section stresses that "doping is fundamentally contrary to the spirit of sport" (World Anti-Doping Code 2009: 14) and the World Anti-Doping Agency's baseline reads not "play healthy" nor "play fair" but, rightly so: "play *true*". *No matter what*, WADA says, doping will always be wrong.

A strictly pragmatic, circumstantial rendering of the doping imbroglio carries the risk that nothing *specific* about doping will be called into question. As such, it leaves one at liberty to conclude that there may be nothing wrong with doping in itself, and that doping might therefore have to be freely allowed as soon as its circumstances are tidied up. Such a 'thin' laissez-faire stance I hold to be frivolous and in disregard for a 'thick', virtue-ethical spirit of sport. Alarming, this thin view is even to be found among WADA experts themselves. Harm Kuipers, for instance, who previously served as a member of WADA's doping commission, argues: "If a substance enhances performance and does not damage one's health, for me it

can be used.” (Kuipers in [Starckx 2008](#): 118, my translation from Dutch) As I will argue here, such a ‘health-only’ view is thoroughly misguided and ethically reckless. To remedy such apparent oblivion for intrinsic issues, in the debate on doping we need to start talking more, and more clearly, about *doping*. In philosophical parlance: we need to address, in a direct and sustained manner, doping’s *categorical* and *intrinsic* traits, by which I mean respectively the traits which are *common to all possible instances* of the category denoted by ‘doping’ and those that are *peculiar and distinguishing* to doping.

At the same time, however, I subscribe wholeheartedly to the important argument made by John Hoberman ( [2009](#) ) and Thomas Murray ( [2009a](#) ) that we should be very wary about dangerously naïve theorizing about performance enhancing interventions in the abstract. Such naiveté can indeed readily spring from at least these three distinct forms of ‘theoretical blindness’: (1) a too short-sighted engineering perspective (“the intervention works in the lab, so why not introduce it in society?”), (2) a too short-sighted libertarian rights perspective (“it’s my body, so why should some regulator get to decide what should and what shouldn’t be in it?”), (3) a too short-sighted virtue perspective (“The truly good and wise can find a way to use this intervention with dignity, so who are we to pass judgment and deny anyone a try?”). Trying to add to received wisdom, I will argue here that in dealing with doping we should *also* be wary of the common bias of *circumstantial blindness*: the inability to see beyond the predicament one – or one’s society – is in at a specific time and place. To come to grips with doping we must neither be starry-eyed nor blinded by the floodlights of the stadium as it stands anno 2012. Both the conceptual and the contextual analyses are indispensable, and we should paddle back and forth between the two to realize a strong reflective equilibrium. Seeking to add to that collective discursive effort, I temporarily turn away from the ‘broad’, circumstantial side of doping and turn towards the ‘deep’, intrinsic end.

A tried and tested philosophical tool to sift out circumstantial traits and allow intrinsic and categorical traits to surface, is to think through what ‘doping’ would *persistently consist of* if it were to exist in a (number of) ‘best of all possible worlds’. All that persists in such worlds indicates intrinsic traits, and all wrongs that there persist indicate intrinsic wrongs. For instance, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* ( [2006 \[1946\]](#) ) served to show how a pure ‘happiness enhancing technology’, the designer drug Soma, seems to be something intrinsically, deeply wrong even if it would be healthy, abundantly available and voluntarily engaged in. In fact, Soma provokes such profound indignation *precisely because* it demonstrates the issue of ‘alienated happiness’ in such an undiluted form. Robert Nozick ( [1974](#): 42–45) famously refined such arguments in his thought experiment of the ‘Experience Machine’, arguing that if a machine would be able to induce the perfectly realistic *experience* of the most stimulating and satisfying life imaginable, this should be rejected. As I will argue, a choice for ‘mental state welfare’ based on self-deception is profoundly undignified, and, curiously, certain pro-talent, anti-doping philosophies seem to advise using one’s given human nature as such an experience machine: to generate the (illusionary) experience that one was purposefully created, which promises substantial existential relaxation.

Huxley and Nozick show that with all preconditions of autonomy, health and fairness met, things can still take a turn for the worse, if not for the worst: persons being perfectly happy and healthy, while at the same time intolerably alienated, inauthentic and dehumanized. In a similar exercise, throughout this chapter I will suspend my judgment on the countless circumstantial problems that surround doping-as-we-know-it-today and attempt a rigorous inquiry on doping’s intrinsic, defining traits. The question is whether an athlete who dopes herself into a perfectly healthy and happy state of high performance thereby inadvertently degrades herself into a state of alienation, inauthenticity or dehumanization.

#### **4.1.2 What is Doping?**

To set apart doping's intrinsic traits, I propose the following as a working definition of doping. Doping can be conceived as:

the use of an exogenous substance, device or method / that enables enhanced physical capacity / by altering a person's bodily make-up / so that a physical capacity level can be reached beyond (a) that which the non-disabled doer possessed before this use (bypassing or 'short-cutting' doping), (b) that which the non-disabled doer might come to possess if she were to apply maximized effort and enjoy optimal social and environmental circumstances (individual surpassing doping), and/or (c) that of the biological species *Homo sapiens* (species surpassing doping) (Fig. 4.1).

Therapy	Bypassing doping	Individual surpassing doping	Species surpassing doping
Restores or improves ability up to a normal healthy level	enhances ability up to a level that can also be reached via better training, focus, dedication, nutrition, coaching, etc.	Enhances ability up to a level that cannot be reached via said ways, but that remains within species boundaries	Enhances ability up to a 'superhuman' level that cannot be reached via said ways and surpasses species boundaries

**Fig. 4.1** Three degrees of doping

In crafting this definition I have taken care to filter out the following elements which are regularly presented as intrinsic traits of doping but which, as I would argue, are neither intrinsic traits nor necessary implications. Rather, they are *possible* (perhaps highly probable) contingencies connected to doping. A specific doping practice might entail several or even all of the following traits, but as I believe we can construe *realistic* alternative doping practices in which all these entailments would *not* be the case, the following traits are not categorically nor intrinsically tied into the concept of 'doping' itself:

1. Doping is unhealthy
2. Doping operates via *artificial* substances, devices or methods
3. Doping is unfair (as in being against the rules, as in there being insufficiently equalized access, or as in placing impermissible coercive pressures on those who do not wish to dope)
4. Doping involves an *intention* to enhance or a 'drive towards mastery'
5. Doping is a sufficient cause for enhanced performance, i.e. effectuates *by itself* or 'automatically' the enhancement of performance, thus bringing about a 'drift towards mechanism'
6. Doping diminishes the need for engaged and effortful involvement by the athlete

#### **4.1.3 A Structured Search for Doping's Intrinsic Wrongs**

The strongest contenders as (seemingly) intrinsic, categorical arguments against doping can be structured along the following three main lines, respectively based on the conviction that a proper athletic accomplishment should: (a) originate from proper origins, such as natural talent; (b) take place via proper, intentionally directed processes; and (c) result in proper, recognizably human outcomes (President's Council on Bioethics 2003 ; Sandel 2007 ; Murray 2009b ; Loland and Hoppeler 2012 ). On these three fronts, doping threatens to turn that proper athletic accomplishment into something *debased*, *mechanistic* and *dehumanizing*, respectively (Fig. 4.2).

Performance	Natural	Doped/Enhanced
<b>Proper Origins</b>	From ‘given’, natural origins  Praised as ‘gifts’, providing a sense of given place, purpose or predestination  Proper, for sports should display who has been allotted greater/lesser talent	From self-styled, artificial origins  Denounced as ‘hyperagency’, eroding our sense of given place, purpose or predestination  Improper, for it distorts the display of ‘real’, natural superiority/inferiority
<b>Proper Processes</b>	Through one’s inherent, endogenous bodily processes and one’s active intentional effort  Praised as authentic accomplishments	Through intrusive, exogenous means and by passively undergoing their influence  Denounced as effortless & inauthentic
<b>Proper Outcomes</b>	‘Vitruvian’  Towards a perfected optimum within the normal, species-typical range  Praised as perfected humanity	‘Promethean’  Towards a distorted excess over and beyond the normal, species-typical range  Denounced as alienating dehumanization

**Fig. 4.2** Three components of a proper athletic accomplishment

As the debate on doping is maturing and unreasoned intuitions are increasingly being taxed and asked to be replaced by sustained ethical argument, the ethical arguments against doping-itself revolve around concerns about the proper appreciation of one’s natural endowment, about the proper cultivation of that endowment, and finally about the proper conservation of that endowment. Thomas Murray, chair of WADA’s Ethical Issues Review Panel, has powerfully captured this talent-based spirit of sport which drives the global ‘war on doping’ and which often presents itself as *the* fundamental spirit of sport, allowing for no plurality on this fundamental level. (See Chap. 16 by Brownsword, this volume) According to Murray, Michael Sandel and the many who concur, the spirit of sport is about *the virtuous perfection of natural talent* (Murray 2009a ; Sandel 2007 and Chap. 10 by McNamee, this volume). Sharing the commitment to virtuous sports, I now take to task these additional requirements of perfectionism and natural talent.

## 4.2 Proper Origins. May the Best, or May the Blessed Man Win

### 4.2.1 Talent As Robustness and Doped Performances As Flukes

Most doping practices we know today seem to enable only a *temporary boost* of performance levels, whereas the presence of natural talent indicates a more durable, longer lasting potential for high-level performance – a *predisposition* proper. For this reason, when comparing capacities to perform, talent-based performances can be believed to be categorically superior to doping-based ones. They provide proof for the existence of a deeply ingrained, robust capacity to perform, whereas doping-based performances only provide proof for a superficially induced, fleeting capacity to perform. Take away the dope, and the capacity level would drop significantly. This may have limited validity if one restricts one’s

view to the effectiveness of contemporary doping technologies, but it would be an exaggerated simplification to say that, come what may, only natural talent can ever count as a truly reliable marker for deeply ingrained, robust potential. We must not let the image of today's pills, syringes and injection needles and the often fleeting effects they bring about obscure the fact that a plethora of future *and current* doping practices will not all follow the lines of this 'Popeye caricature': doping right before the performance is to be performed, bringing the body in a temporary high, resulting in an extraordinary strong performance, after which the enhancing effect fades away and it is revealed how the athlete without the spinach/doping is, 'in reality', a less able athlete who could never have performed her feat 'on her own'.

What this Popeye caricature misses, is that robust potential may also be obtained via certain doping practices, for instance the introduction of a doping agent that would secrete chemicals over a long space of time (contrast Popeye to Spiderman, Asterix to Obelix), or a permanent enhancing intervention such as today's Lasik eye surgery that golfers undergo to provide them with better than 20/20 vision. Theoretically we can conceive of a heart-widening procedure which would allow a cyclist to obtain the large heart (and great advantage for cyclists) which others may have found implanted in them via genetic luck (Mehlman 2009). Ergo, deeply integrated doping practices such as the very real Lasik eye lasering or the still very theoretical heart-widening procedure seem immune to the 'fluke' critique of doping. What is more, even if – counterfactually – not a single type of doping would ever be able to provide a potential for physical performance as profound or durable as natural talent, this alone does not suffice to categorically depreciate the acquisition of abilities via doping – it would only mean that natural talent could be appreciated somewhat more in this regard as it would mark a somewhat more robust potential. In sum, it is an erroneous overgeneralization to hold that doping could only ever induce fluke performances and that natural talent is and always will be the best proxy for deeply ingrained and durable predispositions.

#### **4.2.2 The Talented As the Authentic and Dopers As Phonies**

Precisely by resolving the fluke objection, the deep integration of doping can raise a new set of objections on an altogether different and perhaps more fundamental plane. On this plane, succeeding all too well in endowing the athlete with a predisposition to perform at a level equivalent or even superior to natural talent becomes the problem. The deeper cause for concern is this: by implanting such novel (perhaps more enabling and satisfying) predispositions, one may betray the (perhaps more incapacitating and frustrating) predispositions that are properly one's own, that make up 'the essence' of who one is. The more permanently and profoundly one intervenes in one's own birth suit – and doping can do exactly that – the more one 'tries to be somebody else', the more one turns into a 'phony'. Doping, therefore, might deeply undermine personal authenticity.

In light of this deeper danger posed by human enhancement interventions in general, critics like Carl Elliot and Howard Baillie call for an ethic of authenticity, more precisely an ethic of *affirmative* authenticity (Elliot 2003; Baillie 2005). In such an ethic, self-exploration is conceived of as self-discovery: drawing out what is already inside of you, as opposed to drawing in alien things from the outside. This general authenticity argument can be invoked with extra vigour in the field of sport and doping. Articulating the more fundamental reasons why sport may be of great ethical value, several philosophers have characterized sports as a 'spiritual exercise' of self-discovery. While sport may often seem to be all about *Citius, Altius, Fortius* – that is: about transgressing given physical boundaries and striving towards "superhuman performance" (Savulescu et al. 2004) – this apparently *transgressive* practice can also be understood as an on-going *approximative* discovery of the eventual, ultimate boundaries of one's given potential – talent which nature had already implanted there but needed tending to ('virtuous perfecting') to be made manifest. The reward of an athletic accomplishment based on one's natural talent then lies not only in the pride one can take in the objective performance, but also in the 'revelatory experience' of finding out what

you had in you all along. This perception of athletic exertion as a way of gaining valuable existential self-understanding seems to resonate in such widespread sporting slogans as “show what you are made of”, “find out what you have in you”, “stretch yourself to the limit”, etc.

Any sport hobbyist might thus engage in his private athletic soul-search, as for instance the environmentalist Bill McKibben describes the deeper meaning of his personal jogging routine in his anti-enhancement book *Enough* (2004: 1–66) or as Thomas Murray describes his cycling runs (Murray 2009b). Moreover, as Darian Meacham as well as Tara Magdalinski describe in their contributions to this volume, in the top performances of the global elite athletes this dynamic is played out on a species-level.<sup>2</sup> At the Olympics, those elite athletes reveal what ‘mankind’ has in itself – what mankind truly is. Between the gifted, perfected athletes and the less-gifted, less-perfected members of the audience, a deep form of bonding can take place provided that two premises (are believed to) hold: (1) the top athlete and the audience member share a species constitution, and (2) talents are distributed within the species in a random way, via ‘the natural lottery’. As such, an audience member (as the Everyman) and the audience as a whole (as the People) can witness a top athlete accomplish superior feats and deeply identify with those accomplishments, thinking ‘yes, look at what my/our mankind is capable of’, and, ‘yes, had fortune dealt its cards differently it might just as well have been me/anyone of us starring the show’.<sup>3</sup>

For such revelations and identifications to take place, it is imperative that no-one is meddling with the communal constitution of human nature, nor with the dynamic of arbitrary allotment of talents via the natural lottery.<sup>4</sup> Doping seems to be exactly such meddling, and this may provide good reason to categorically reject it. Indeed, from this perspective of self-discovery and group identification, doping presents itself as a diametrically opposed practice of self- *alteration* and group- *dissociation*. I will reserve a further discussion of group-dissociation for the section on proper outcomes and will now focus on the problem of individual self-alteration. Instead of showing what someone is made of, doping makes that someone anew. By redrawing one’s given physical boundaries instead of approximating them, doping blurs precisely what the ethic of affirmative authenticity wanted to bring into sharp focus. Such arguments help to explain why doping can be considered as a form of cheating not in the superficial sense of breaking a conventional agreement that no one is to use stimulants just like no football player is allowed to carry the ball over the field in his hands, but cheating in a more profound sense as cheating oneself in becoming a fake, a phony, a fraud – denying and corrupting who one ‘really is’ or ‘was cut out to be’.

However, the ethic of authenticity as presented so far seems too crude and uncritical of its own presuppositions. Identifying ourselves with our biological determinants and affirming those determinants as the constituents of our authentic selves yields fundamental problems too – problems pertaining to biological determinism, essentialism, the naturalistic fallacy and in extremis: social Darwinism. This is an instance in which the virtue ethical critique must cut *both* ways: true, technological alterations of one’s biological constitution may well present grave challenges to the maintenance of one’s authenticity, but an excessive conservation and normative affirmation of one’s given biological constitution may do the same.

In the timeless Nature-Nurture debate, there is an overwhelming contemporary consensus that no matter how much our biological underpinnings may determine our psychological and motivational identity structures, the *facts* of our biological existence have no say in determining the *values* of our *moral* existence. No matter how frustrating it may be in our search for a straightforward moral compass, there stands a wall of separation between ‘is’ and ‘ought’. Our nature may tell us some things about what makes us *feel* good,<sup>5</sup> but is mute as a tomb about what might make us *be* good. In the abstract, one’s biological nature and the natural processes by which one receives one’s particular biological endowment are a-moral and existentially pointless. Considering the specifics of the natural evolutionary forces that made us, they are quite pitiless too. Therefore, in posing the question whether we are in any way ethically obliged to



honour our biological constitution, the conclusion seems rather inverse. We must “rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators [i.e. our genes]” ( Dawkins 2006 [1989]: 201) From a understanding of the actual trappings of our evolutionarily cobbled together *Homo sapiens* nature, and from an affirmation of our *ethical* and *existential* authenticity, we do right to, in a sense, “establish an identity which lies at an ever-increasing distance from our organic nature[.]” (Tallis 2007 )

In sum, the notion that our natural constitution – our talents or our lack of talent alike – is something we should morally affirm and conserve on account of it being the authentic thing to do has at best a severely constrained validity. In fact, such affirmation and conservation may regularly be the morally and existentially *inauthentic* thing to do.

What does this imply with regards to doping? If one engages only occasionally in the aforementioned ‘fluke doping’, few authenticity concerns seem to rise. But if one engages in *habitual, chronic use* of such brief booster doping, or if one elects to undergo a form of *deeply integrated* doping, then such chronic or constant reconfigurations of one’s embodiment and one’s capacities may indeed bring about substantial reconfigurations of one’s sense of self, too. In itself, however, such self-altering practices need not raise authenticity issues of ‘no longer being oneself’ or ‘becoming a phony’. The recognition of this possibility does, however, make the maintenance of essentialist and teleological conceptions of the self difficult, and seem to require the adoption of some ‘narrative’ conception of personal identity (DeGrazia 2005 ; Levy 2011 ). In the abstract, such an assertive decision to take full responsibility over one’s randomly obtained endowment – provided that that decision is earnestly recognized and undertaken *as such* – may even be virtuous acts of humanistic *Bildung* and existentialistic courage.

In practice, however, such decisions to substantially reconfigure and to intentionally re-create oneself in accordance with one’s values and preferences, cannot be taken lightly (Frankfurt 1971 ; Schechtman 2004 ). Not only is there always the danger of dubious norms and motives informing the decision on how to alter oneself (the most outspoken concern of Carl Elliot); such self-alterations are likely to require intensive labours of deep reflection and deliberation – both within oneself as within one’s community, as they have the potential to fracture the fragile fabrics of both one’s own historical self-understanding and of one’s myriad communitarian ties (the most outspoken concern of Harold Baillie). Even if deeply integrated or habitual doping may in general bring about less drastic ‘upheavals of identity’ than, say, sex reassignment surgery or the integration of means which directly alter one’s emotional, perceptual or cognitive constitution, such doping practices still seem to form a particularly dramatic category of self-change activity. Undertaken in a wrong way, for wrong reasons (which may be very probable), deeply integrated doping would be deplorably undignified. Undertaken in a right way, for right reasons (which may be very unlikely), doping (of the deeply integrated or the fleeting variety) may be positively dignified – and a worthy, albeit risky aim for athletes of a humanistic or existentialistic bent.

#### **4.2.3 Natural Endowment As the Gift of Place and Purpose, and Doping As Its Loss**

Continuing the argumentative cascade, the very resolution of the authenticity concerns can give rise to a new set of objections on an even more fundamental plane than that of personal authenticity. That even deeper cause for concern is this: precisely by heeding the moral call of his personal authenticity only all too well, the ‘self-made man’ may come to neglect the respect he is due not to his self, but to the forces that made him. Becoming oneself the decider on how one is going to be constituted, as doping arguably does, overrules the original plans as encapsulated in one’s innate biological blueprint. This overruling can be seen as a moral transgression: at a certain level of depth – the specifics of which can be debated – one should curtail one’s own sphere of legitimate agency and stay true to something *even more originary* than

one's 'ego'. Perhaps this is where the intuition comes from that the 'gifted athlete', like the 'natural beauty', deserves special reverence: she got her special gift from nature, whereas the doer helped herself to a gift – as an usurper, as an ingrate, or as someone with an excessive “*drive towards mastery*” (Sandel 2007: 27).

In this regard Michael Sandel writes in the chapter “The Bionic Athlete” of his influential anti-enhancement essay *The Case Against Perfection*:

The deeper danger is that [human enhancement technologies] represent a kind of hyperagency, a Promethean aspiration to remake nature, including human nature, to serve our purposes and satisfy our desires. [...] To acknowledge the giftedness of life is to recognize that our talents and powers are not wholly our own doing, nor even fully ours, despite the efforts we expend to develop and to exercise them. [...] It is, in part, a religious sensibility. But its resonance reaches beyond religion. (Sandel 2007: 26–27).

Ultimately, however, I fail to discern in Sandel's writing an actual *principled* argument to ground the claim that our (lack of) talents should be kept as-is on account of their giftedness. I do, however, find a number of *prudential* arguments on discomforts that are best avoided:

[T]he real problem is the explosion, not the erosion, of responsibility. As humility gives way, responsibility expands to daunting proportions. We attribute less to chance and more to choice. [...] One of the blessings of seeing ourselves as creatures of nature, God, or fortune is that we are not wholly responsible for the way we are. (idem: 87)

There is something appealing, even intoxicating, about a vision of human freedom unfettered by the given. [...] But that vision of freedom is flawed. It threatens [...] to leave us with nothing to affirm or behold outside our own will. (idem: 99–100, the book's closing paragraph)

I wholeheartedly agree with Sandel that the growing number of practical possibilities to make decisions about how we are constituted burdens us with new levels of responsibility, of indeed daunting proportions. <sup>6</sup>And I also agree that a vision of human freedom unconstrained by predetermined givens leaves us with little more to affirm or behold outside our own will. To be so 'foundationlessly free and ruthlessly responsible' can indeed be a despairingly unmoored predicament to find ourselves in. As Allen Buchanan and colleagues note: “If we can no longer convince ourselves that human nature provides significant constraints on the pursuit of individual or social good, we may feel cast adrift in a sea of possibilities.” (Buchanan et al. 2000: 93) If we could legitimately escape such a predicament, that would indeed be a blessing.

Sandel clearly believes we can escape such a predicament: we should start “seeing ourselves as creatures of nature, God, or fortune” – that way “we are not wholly responsible for the way we are”. Yet no argument is provided how we might *legitimately* see ourselves that way. Allusions are made, however, to the “blessing” (87) of the psychological comfort gained by believing oneself to be a creature of some originary creative force. In one convenient move, Sandel circumvents both those daunting degrees of responsibility as well as the aporic challenge of creating meaning for yourself from the vantage point of a godforsaken, nature-forsaken freedom.

With proper argument wanting and only a 'vision' of the lure of a life with lessened responsibility and a pre-existing meaning and purpose to our lives, I can only return to sender Sandel's argument: there is something appealing, even intoxicating, about a vision of a *given human nature* unfettered by *freedom*



*and personal responsibility.* But that vision of *giftedness* is flawed, as it threatens to leave us with nothing to affirm or behold outside *pointless, pitiless nature.*

With Sandel I denounce the excessive “drive towards mastery” that seems to motivate some – perhaps many – advocates of human enhancement. But the ethics of virtue and authenticity equally compel me to denounce the excesses of a drive towards the comforts of an *amor fati* which seems to motivate some – perhaps many – to outsource responsibilities that are *de facto* theirs to entities such as a normatively charged conception of “nature, God, or fortune” – the existence of which remains to be argued for, whereas the arguments for their *mere desirability* are ready to come by. As such, it seems plausible to understand such lines of reasoning as a choice for (false) comfort and certainty over the dignity and virtue of daring to accept – perhaps dauntingly uncomfortable – facts of our existential predicament. In this sense I believe the widespread experience of “moral vertigo” (Sandel 2007: 9), outrage and indignation in the face of deep possibilities of self-creation may in part be the result of the fact that such “unwelcome liberations” (Bonte 2008 ) are increasingly making an existentialist self-understanding hard to deny or brush aside. I quote Jean-Paul Sartre’s Existentialism is a Humanism *in extenso*, as it reads like a direct, point-per-point contestation of Sandel:

We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free. [E]very man, without any support or help whatever, is condemned at every instant to invent man. [T]o begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing [...] That is the first principle of existentialism. [T]he first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders. [M]an is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself. [O]ne will never be able to explain one’s action by reference to a given and specific human nature; in other words, there is no determinism – man is free, man is freedom. (Sartre 1989 [1946] – my italics)

Doping makes this existentialist self-conception of finding ourselves condemned to be ‘foundationlessly free and ruthlessly responsible’ strike right at the heart of sport, that cultural institution which is deeply predicated on both investing deep meaning in our nature-given embodiments as well as on fetishizing passionate and self-assured human action driven by prefixed rules to live by, crystal-clear goals to strive towards, and gratifyingly instant and absolute standards and judgments on behaviour that is right or wrong, excellent or failing. Sport thus fetishizes, albeit ironically in a wholly artificial environment constituted by man himself, the Nature-driven, Purpose-driven life. Precisely in this dreamland of teleology and given purpose, doping is providing proof of concept that a *telos* can be constructed at will. If there is a ‘given fate’ to be accepted, it is that man is ‘the fateless animal’.

It is emotionally understandable that a person regularly seeks relief from such a disorienting self-understanding and rather leaves such thoughts unthought-of. A pervasive way in which this happens is by self-deceptive storytelling about how blessed it would be if we would be meaningfully created beings, with a self-evident natural mould to fall back on and be carried away by. Nobel-Prize winning poet Wislawa Szymborska masterfully strikes this chord in her evocative poem *In Praise of Self-Depreciation* (Krynski and Maguire 1981 ):

The buzzard has nothing to fault himself with.  
Scruples are alien to the black panther.  
Piranhas do not doubt the rightness of their actions.  
The rattlesnake approves of himself without reservations.

The self-critical jackal does not exist.  
The locust, alligator, trichina, horse fly  
Live as they live and are glad of it.  
The killer-whale's heart weighs one hundred kilos  
but in other respects is light.  
There is nothing more animal-like  
than a clear conscience  
on the third planet of the Sun.

Animals can indeed be said to be blessed with a “clear conscience” and they can seem to “live as they live and are glad of it”. As mentioned above, sports (as well as religion) can perhaps be seen as an immensely popular ‘therapeutic fabulation’ to satisfy this deep yearning to recuperate a lost, self-evident life propelled by an animalistic sense of purpose. Doping, as a sobering testament to our ‘natureless’ existence, ruins the animalistic flight of fancy that is sports.

Ultimately, however, it is vital that these flights of fancy remain recognized as such: as therapeutic fabulation, as (rationally-)irrational ‘coping practices’ in function of our comfort and satisfaction. On an existentialist conception of human dignity, that dignity compels us not to get too carried away by athletic or religious make-belief about living a Nature-driven, Purpose-driven life. Such practices are to be understood as artful ‘play’ of the *Homo ludens* ( [Huizinga 2008 \[1938\]](#) ; [Suits 1978](#) ). <sup>7</sup> Indeed, there is a sense in which doping could drive home the ‘scandalous’ thesis of both Huizinga and Suits that human culture, once it has overcome the preliminary business of overcoming obstacles to welfare and free self-determination, is eventually ‘play’ or ‘game’ – that is: “the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles” ([Suits 1978](#): 41). Suits speculates that a life in which the need for instrumental labour is overcome – a life in which one finds oneself ‘no longer of any use’ – would commonly be considered superfluous and pointless, and people would resolve this frustration by resorting to self-deception, creating for themselves all manner of purposeful activity which they believe to be of vital necessity. The whole pseudo-instrumental enterprise would, however, be a tragedy, if not a farce, of self-deception.

In this sense then, doping can appear as a vindication of the dignity of the *Homo ludens*. In direct opposition to both the animalistic and religious conceptions of sports (non-artistically understood), via doping one can affirm and embrace the existentialist self-understanding that eventually, human beings are bound to live a life beyond utility and need: playing ‘useless’ games of their own devise, in ‘useless’ bodies of their own devise.

It seems quite apt to consider human life, the human body included, as one’s own work of art, as an artifice of one’s own will. Human nature may be exactly this: to find, at the outset, “nothing to affirm or behold beside one’s own will”. Human dignity then lies in accepting and affirming this Ourobouros-like predicament we find ourselves in: being fundamentally circular ‘strange loops’ ([Hofstadter 2007](#) ). Contra Sandel, such a vision of freedom is not at all flawed. But he may be right in finding it uncomfortable to the point of desperation.

#### **4.2.4 Talent As a Signal of Fitness and Doping As Misleading Mimicry**

Turning away from ‘high minded’ objections of (superficial) authenticity and (false) humility, a final contender for the categorical preference for talent over doping is of a primitive and lowly nature. Both sports and beauty pageants are regularly suspected of being perilously primitive, a relapse into more brutish ways of interacting with and appreciating one another. There may be something to that suspicion.

There is one fundamental dimension in which doping cannot provide what natural talent can. Doping lacks the same fundamental thing a silicone- filled bosom lacks: contrary to naturally given phenotypical traits,

the deeply integrated athletic or aesthetic enhancements are no *signals of hereditary potential*. They can only mimic such a signal. <sup>8</sup> So long as the enhancement technologies do not induce *hereditary* enhancements (which is, however, not theoretically impossible), their effects are in this hereditary sense categorically more superficial and fleeting. Even if they would be so deeply integrated that they exert their enhancing influence flawlessly throughout the entire lifespan of the doer, perhaps even more reliably and robustly as natural talent ever would, their enhancing influence would never live on in their offspring.

To the extent that sport competitions still are in part atavistic relics of the ceremonial competition between animals to demonstrate who is the alpha male or female (a point strongly argued for by De Block and Dewitte 2009), doping would dramatically corrupt this primal 'spirit of sport': to demonstrate who is 'truly', genetically superior with respect to physical prowess. To the extent that we still are hardwired to seek out such reliable markers of hereditary physical superiority, doping, like silicone, frustrates. From the perspective of this primal evolutionary-psychological craving, which is itself highly dubious and dangerous as a normative stance ('fascistoid' even, according to bio-ethicist Torbjörn Tännsjö (2000)), they can be regarded as superficial, 'fake' and categorically inferior abominations that corrupt this primal point to sports. This may be a way to flesh out Eric Juengst's suggestion that deeper reflection on the widespread categorical objection to doping may reveal how many still turn to sport to "glorify a genetic prejudice that the world is working hard to evolve beyond in other spheres of human life." (Juengst 2009: 176–177) In this sense, 'natural sport' and 'natural beauty pageants' may sometimes in part be *social Darwinist* institutions that take it one step further than classic *laissez-faire* social Darwinism. Here, an interventionist brand of social Darwinism may sometimes be operating, installing 'talentocratic' measures that actively keep the playing field tilted in favour of the in-bred privilege of the talented against those who would implant equal or superior abilities with which they might match or outperform the talented. As they have often been in the past, in their response to human enhancement interventions both athletic competitions and beauty pageants may once again be at an increased risk of falling prey to *eugenic* modes of thinking.

Curiously, the risk of eugenics looms at *both* ends of the spectrum in the doping debate. In pro enhancement writing, one can regularly find the naturalistic fallacy being brazenly flaunted, for instance when 'transhumanists' believe themselves to be carrying out the imperatives of Evolution. <sup>9</sup> In doing so, they fallaciously upgrade the abstract evolutionary principle of 'survival of the fittest' into a moral and existential directive. Where some overbearing transhumanists feel they must obey the evolutionary directive that the 'the *de facto* strongest must prevail', some overbearing 'talentocrats' might feel that 'the *naturally* strongest must prevail' – that the point of sport is in part really to reveal, in a literal eu-genicist fashion, who has been endowed with the best genetic material. Too manifestly unnatural ways of becoming able-bodied are then to be actively made taboo and if possible, forbidden and persecuted.

To the extent that either excessively atavistic evolutionary psychology or social Darwinism and perhaps literally gene-centered eugenicism would be found present in either a transhumanist or a talentocratic spirit of sport, this would need to be exposed in detail, rigorously critiqued and supplanted by a spirit of sport that escapes these excesses. In order to avoid such excesses and all the other issues hitherto raised, I think it best to forcefully discard the exclusivist requirement of natural talent.

### **4.3 Proper Processes. Just Do It, or: Let Nature Do It for You**

If one accepts the conclusion that a proper athletic accomplishment does not necessarily have to originate in natural talent, the most fundamental problem seems resolved. Nevertheless, one can still object that the *process* of an athletic performance must be natural in some crucial way. When discussing proper origins, concerns revolved around doping threatening to uproot a person. The proper processes concerns are

seemingly more mundane. No existential crises are feared of doping sinners becoming debased, hubristic and aporic 'hyperagents' (Sandel 2007). On the contrary, the doping athlete is here experienced as a dud – a non-agent. The overt action is only *apparently* undertaken by the athlete. In reality, due to the aid, it actually becomes a non-act to a substantial degree. A doping athlete is then seen as one who fraudulently tries to pass as the agent accountable for her feats while in fact she relied on a 'hidden helper' which did a substantial amount of the work *for her*.

The issue seems to revolve around *accountability*: is a doped athlete really performing the feat herself, can she be held accountable for the outcome, does she deserve the pride and the praise, the position and the prize?

It is intuitively appealing to think that no, she doesn't deserve full credit for the performance, and if the context would be that an athlete A took recourse to such a 'hidden helper' while her competitors B to E all competed without it, 'on their own inner strength', then A cheated or is at least less deserving of her final position, even in the absence of an explicit ban: regardless of regulations and stipulations, it would be an offense against this intrinsic, essential characteristic of virtuous sport – that you yourself do the work.

We can even take it one step further. As the anti-doping author Bill McKibben notes while contemplating the ethical inner dynamics of his own recreational running experience, even in a *non-competitive* context would the insertion of such a foreign doping agent in your own body cause an unacceptable accountability problem. According to McKibben, this would upset the beneficial, natural way in which you can consider yourself the author of your own actions, and the interference of the performance enhancer with your natural capacities would send you reeling in "a spiraling self-doubt" (McKibben 2004: 55) of not being able to ascertain if it was '*really you*' who is accountable (to be distinguished from the dimension mentioned in the Proper Origins section, where a spiraling self-doubt lay in it becoming muddled *who 'the real you' is* – that is: of a person no longer knowing who she is anymore). For this reason, performance enhancing drugs may be found ethically impermissible in a categorical way, because as soon as you allow yourself to become 'mixed' like that, you will be at a loss to determine just what you have done 'on your own', and what was done by the dope.

Appealing as this alarmism may sound as a *prima facie* credible account of proper personal accountability, we must see how this view fares after taking into account the following three issues: (1) the possibility of *agency-enabling* doping, which lifts internal barriers so that one is put at liberty to engage in *increased* exertion; (2) the possibility of *baseline-lifting* doping, which increases the amount of feats one can perform without exertion only to put one at liberty to engage in *identical* levels of exertion when performing further feats at a higher level of complexity; and (3) the critical comparison of the possibility of passive reliance on doping to the pervasive reality of our passive reliance on (semi-)automatic assistive processes of our default biological constitution. We must thereby also ask the question why the relatively effortless natural grace of the naturally talented commonly inspires such awe whereas the realization of ease in performance via doping often inspires disgust and outrage.

### **4.3.1 Agency-Enabling Doping**

If we move past armchair philosophy in these matters and look *empirically* at the diversity and detail of how the human body can be stimulated by all sorts of biotechnological interventions, we find that enhancement interventions needn't be *intrusive*, working you like a puppet. They may well be 'eruptive', lifting internal blockades on agency. In this sense, for instance anabolic steroids are not at all 'mechanizing' or 'passivity-inducing': they do not make muscle growth 'easy' or 'automatic' as a tenacious caricatural misconception has it. In fact, as Andrew Holowchak recounts in his contribution to this volume, it is the other way round: the actual influence of steroids on the body is that they make the body recover

more quickly after very intensive exhaustion, so that you may exhaust the body anew at a quicker pace *provided* that you can muster the willpower to do so. Steroids do not do the work for you, on the contrary: they provide you with an opportunity to increase your active effort to exhaust yourself, which you still have to be motivated for. You still have to 'just do it' yourself. Ergo, powerlifting guru Louie Simmons is confident when he says: "the people who train with anabolic steroids train way harder than the people who don't." (Simmons in Bell 2008) As such, it seems to be an overstatement to think that all doping agents would 'do the work for you' and erode the degree of active engagement and wilful effort beneath crucial thresholds. As the previous fluke and phoney critiques, this critique of passivity needs to be deflated from a categorical critique to a probabilistic, circumstantial one.

### **4.3.2 Baseline-Lifting Doping**

What is more, even in the case of specific doping agents which do increase your athletic ability in some decisively 'mechanizing' or 'passive' way, such as blood doping or oxygen chambers seem to do, the most obvious effect, amply demonstrated in the history of sport when new facilitating support practices are being introduced (Van Hilvoorde et al. 2007) is that the athletes with enhanced baseline abilities will seek out new, more intensive and trying challenges. An all-encompassing conception of doping as an 'outsourcing of effort', setting us on a slippery slope towards a culture of slothful, passive technology consumers (McKibben 2004; Kass 2002) must be dismissed as hyperbolic. <sup>10</sup> As long as we are able to retain our ability to relocate our locus of active engagement, the 'outsourcing of effort' – be it to some natural or some technological process, be it internal or external – is not intrinsically problematic: after we allowed fiber poles in pole jumping, we raised the bar and the spirit of sport lived on; and if for instance endurance enhancing doping such as blood doping, oxygen chambers and EPO-injections can be provided adequately safe and equitable, we could add an extra epic *col* to the Tour de France – or, alternatively, we could use such doping practices to *reign in* current excesses: to remake contemporary cycling into a somewhat more healthy and safe enterprise. <sup>11</sup>

### **4.3.3 Passive Consumption of Natural Processes**

Again, it merits to redirect the critique directed at doping towards natural talent itself, and see how that fares. There seems to be little wrong with relying 'passively' on automatic or semi-automatic bodily processes, for that is the way the vast majority of our countless bodily processes operate, from blood flow to oxygen uptake over habituated skill and countless ways of subconscious mental pre-processing, by which we outsource enormous amount of effort so that our mind is freed up to be occupied with further, more complex activities. Using the inflated rhetoric of McKibben and Kass, we could say that if we are to some extent 'slothful, passive technology consumers', then we are to an incomparably greater extent 'slothful, passive *nature* consumers'.

Although the spirit of sport can at times be seen to revolve around notions of effort and exhaustive training, intriguingly, the athletes considered to be 'the greatest of them all' are often those who to a certain but crucial extent exhibit *the exact opposite* of effort and exhaustive training: public exhilaration is heightened to a whole new level if an athlete can pass a heroic athletic test 'without even breaking a sweat'. The natural grace of a Usain Bolt or a Michael Jordan inspires the greatest awe:

[S]triving is not the point of sports; excellence is. [...] No one believes that a mediocre basketball player who works and trains even harder than Michael Jordan deserves greater acclaim. (Sandel 2007: 28–29)

[E]ven if we are prepared to admire people who have worked hard [...] I believe that we will have added admiration for a person who excels without having worked hard. If a middle-aged member of the audience who has never exercised unexpectedly walked down



from the stadium and joined the Olympic 10,000 m race and, because of superior natural talent, defeated all the finalists, the success would be formidable. Our admiration for this person would be unlimited. So, basically, it is talent (which can be genetically explained), not achievement, that we admire above else. The point of the contest is to show who has the most superior talent. (Tännsjö 2000: 18)

But this confronts us with two apparent contradictions:

1. The WADC-spirit of sport is often portrayed to consist crucially in *effort and training*, but if someone with great natural talent can perform the athletic feat (*comparatively*) *effortlessly*: even better.

2. If a *gifted* athlete performs *effortlessly*, that is good or even wonderful, but if a *doped* athlete would perform *effortlessly*, that is bad or even horrendous.

These contradictions can be made sense of in the following two ways. To explain the first apparent contradiction, imagine a 200 m sprint where two runners, A and B, cross the finish line at the same time, but A has had to invest all his effort and staggers unto the ground panting, whereas B (B for Bolt Usain, say) runs unexhausted toward the cameras to mimic a lightning bolt striking at the speed of light. The fully exhausted A may be greatly appreciated for having made the excellent time, and for having demonstrated the impressive character traits of extraordinary determination and willpower. But with regard to athletic skill per se, athlete B can be admired more because he has clearly not exhausted all of his running capacity: compared to A, Bolt still has a reservoir of untapped potential, and thus demonstrates by his lack of fatigue and his lesser effort that he has a potential for running skill superior to A's. They may have crossed the line at the same time on this occasion, but should Bolt choose to also invest the extraordinary perseverance of A, his performance would outmatch A's.

The second contradiction, an apparent double standard, can be made intelligible by referring back to the social Darwinist and eugenicist understandings of natural sport. Today's class of the effortless naturally talented can be seen as the heirs of the radically different 'gentleman-amateur' spirit of sport that heavily influenced the Olympic Games and other sports milieus until mid-twentieth century, and was its official doctrine until the late 1980s (Guttman 2002 ). In that spirit of sport, sport was supposed to be a *leisurely* activity, certainly not something to spend all your waking hours on, let alone to engage in as a *profession* – that would be disgracefully obsessive and beside the point of sport as a wholesome display of readily available bodily capacity. Certainly in its nineteenth century beginnings, modern sport was meant to exhibit a spontaneous 'natural nobility'. The 'amateur gentlemen' athlete was to prove his noble pedigree via good sporting capacities, which provided proof 'of being of good stock' in an (often implicit, but occasionally explicit) eugenic sense. A sport performance, though very energetic and exhaustive, was nevertheless meant to exhibit, if it was to be truly outstanding, a measure of cool off-handedness – to come across as spontaneous demonstrations of stallions who have 'plenty more where that came from'.

Today sport may have been turned into an industry filled with people *working* as athletes and spending their entire (young) life in specialized training facilities, and viewed from the old amateur spirit of sport, this would be seen as an unsavoury medico-scientific conditioning of people like rats in a cage (Young 1996, a critique I subscribe to myself), which only threatens to skew the view on who belongs to 'the *natural* aristocracy' (Jefferson 1988 [1813]: 387–391; Mehlman 2009 ). Interestingly, however, even in the contemporary high-intensity sport industry, sport fans commonly continue to reserve a modicum of extra appreciation to those athletes who still manage to exhibit that Old World regal sense of being 'nature's aristocracy' (for instance the flair of Michael "His Airness" Jordan) or being, in a more straightforward way, pure 'forces of nature' (for instance the frolicking Usain "Lightning" Bolt). This, then, is how the double standard about effortlessness can be made sense of: such 'off-handed' effortlessness of Jordan, Bolt and



consorts is something completely different than the 'hands-on' effortlessness induced by an intrusive intervention in one's body with the explicit intention to maximize one's athletic performance. Not only could such endeavours of biotechnological self-change bespeak a fundamental character flaw of over-eagerness (a probabilistic critique I again subscribe to myself), moreover they are a corruption of sport as a transparent testing ground for talent-centered, genetic hierarchies (a categorical critique I would, on the contrary, staunchly oppose as indicative of a social Darwinist if not eugenicist interest).

In sum, as discussed here, these three concerns about proper processes fail to provide compelling reasons to demand that the processes of athletic accomplishment be *natural*.

Concerned about the neglect of the proper processes of human activity, Leon Kass writes: "there is a sense that the "naturalness" of means matters. It lies not in the fact that the assisting drugs and devices are artefacts, but in the danger of violating or deforming the deep structure of natural human activity." From this concern, he goes on to famously conclude that "the engaged and energetic being-at-work of what nature uniquely gave to us is what we need to treasure and defend." (Kass 2003 ) From my existentialist virtue-ethics perspective, I share much of this concern: we indeed need to treasure and defend our engaged and energetic being-at-work, and self-abdication into slothful passivity and fatalism must be strongly resisted. But ironically, it is for that exact same reason that I cannot accept the exclusivist clause that this must be done and can only be done with "what nature uniquely gave us". Not only does this neglect (or in the worst case: denigrates) those who are engaged and energetically-at-work *with what culture and technology gave them*. For instance, the double amputee and 'blade runner' Oscar Pistorius provides a powerful example of the dignified way in which a person can deeply submerge himself in a partly artificial bodily predicament, and our spirit of sport should honour such dignified interactions with deeply integrated artifice. (See also Chap. 13 by Magdalinski, this volume) Moreover, it neglects the fact that the virtue of temperance should also be applied to the extent in which we adopt a passive consumerist stance with regard to how (semi-)automatic natural processes do the work for us, and to the extent in which talentocrats would improperly claim intentional accountability and personal merit for beneficial natural endowments that are not their own doing, but rather their arbitrarily obtained good fortune.

To conclude, these considerations seem to result in the following general virtue-ethical criterion about doping practices with regards to the issue of Proper Processes taken in isolation:

Further possible issues suspended, insofar as a doping practice only *provides a constitution* from which all worthwhile aspects of engaged and energetic being-at-work are safeguarded, it is permissible. Insofar as a doping practice enlarges the extent in which one can be engaged and energetically-at-work, it is commendable and may be positively dignified.

#### **4.4 Proper Outcomes. Sporting Towards a Blank Slate or To Showcase a Blueprint**

If one accepts the conclusion that a proper athletic accomplishment does not necessarily have to draw on natural origins nor take place via natural processes, the two most formidable <sup>12</sup> problems have been resolved. One might, however, still object that the end states reached in a proper athletic accomplishment must always strive towards a (perfection of) the natural human figure and functions. that is: it must result in (the perfection of) an embodiment and performances that remain within the phenotypical range of *Homo sapiens*. <sup>13</sup>

Modern sport can be seen as a twin project: the perfecting of man, together with the *purification* of man. When Pierre de Coubertin rekindled the Olympian Flame in 1894 there was a lively sense that human biology still harboured vast amounts of untapped potential. Human living conditions were to a large extent unsanitary and unscientific, so there were countless medical, hygienical, nutritional, scouting and coaching advances lying ahead. By scouting for the most well-endowed individuals of the human race, improving their hygiene and nutrition, and enlisting them in a meticulously planned and monitored scheme of training, the 'purified and perfected man' would be approximated ever more closely. From that historical vantage point, the Olympics could be given the motto *Citius, Altius, Fortius* (Faster, Higher, Stronger) from the best intentions: it was a clarion call for spreading the liberal dream of public health programs, the integration of physical exercise is a well-balanced art of living, open meritocracy and humanism predicated on the unity of mankind ( [Coubertin 1992 \[1913\]](#) ). *In tempore non suspecto*, it was not yet read as an implicit invitation to perform-at-all-cost and obsess over outward results, the naturalness and the virtue of the athlete be damned. The project of Coubertin and his successors was to display virtuoso expressions of the universal 'blueprint of humanity' seen as common heritage of mankind that is to be cherished, conserved, purified and perfected. The spirit of sport was one of 'Vitruvian perfectionism', after the image of Leonardo da Vinci's blueprint drawing of the perfectly proportioned, well-created Vitruvian Man. (See also Chaps. 7, 10, 13 and 14 by Meacham, Magdalinski, McNamee and Hoberman, this volume).

#### **4.4.1 Reshaping the Human Figure As Straying from the Original Plan**

The belief that humans are the more or less imperfect instantiations of an underlying pure template (a Platonic Form, a divinely ordained blueprint, an essentialist 'natural kind', etc.) has been decisively discredited by an overwhelming body of scientific evidence. Human biology is in no way a fixed natural kind containing a distinct essence of humanity. Nor can mankind be seen as some sort of pinnacle of the natural world – a highest or most perfect species. Such beliefs, and refined variations thereupon, nevertheless remain widely held and are occasionally explicitly articulated and argued for, most noticeably in theologies of sport (Weir 2011, see also John Hoberman's contribution to this volume). I cannot go into the relevant details of evolutionary science in the space of this chapter. Moreover, both Andreas De Block and Eric Juengst already present some basic facts to debunk such notions of species essentialism in their contributions to this volume. Suffice it to say that if the Vitruvian dimension of modern Olympism would imagine itself to be in pursuit of a matter of (naturalistically demonstrable) fact, it is deeply mistaken.

#### **4.4.2 Reshaping the Human Figure As Repugnant Deformation**

Alternatively, one could argue for the categorical denunciation of doping on the grounds of a deeply felt repugnance. Such profound sentiments of repugnance in the face of too aberrantly 'unnatural' entities and practices have been intensively studied in (evolutionary) psychology. Doping and the deviant embodiments it may bring about can indeed ignite deeply ingrained aversions. For instance, the practices of ingesting, injecting or implanting some enhancing substance may spark aversion based on the avoidance of 'contamination'-like interactions, even if, in reality, the substance would be perfectly healthy or even health-improving (as, for instance, the widespread 'enhancement' practice of vaccination does). Also, introduction of enhancing substances drawn from other animals may spark aversions based on the avoidance of species intermingling, as it might also frustrate the deeply ingrained (but all too 'rough and ready') cognitive mechanisms to classify entities into distinct and essentialistically understood 'natural kinds'. To conclude, doping that effectively 'deforms' the natural human form is also likely to jar the manifold ways in which the human mind is preconfigured to react to the particularities of characteristically human features – such as characteristically human body shapes, facial features, movement patterns, odours, etc. The deviant embodiments doping can bring about might run counter to these deeply entrenched perceptive and evaluative systems, creating possible intolerable levels of confusion, frustration and aversion, which may in turn solidify into a stance of 'allergic' repugnance, intolerance and, in the most

extreme cases, outright hatred and aggression against those who dope and turn themselves into 'entartete' deviants of the normal, natural human mould.

Whether they are shaped by these quirks of evolutionary psychology or not, and whether they cannot be helped or instead can be mitigated or fully overcome, in principle everyone is entitled to have the tastes and distastes one has – no questions asked. <sup>14</sup> As such, a value community that finds doping categorically repugnant could be allowed to organize sports activities in which doping athletes will not be allowed because that community finds them repugnant – similar to how a swing dance troupe may enforce an internal ban on cha-cha should they for instance find cha-cha intolerably campy and a ruination of the brittle and unique internal spirit of swing, which they perceive as the only way to dance like one should.

This, however, works both ways. Certain (minoritarian) value communities may find very attractive, on account of their own aesthetic idiosyncrasies, certain 'unnatural' bodily figures and functionalities (such as for instance enormous amounts of bulging muscle mass and an 'inhuman' weightlifting capacity, hyper-flexible limbs and an 'inhuman' snake-like flexibility, surgically split tongues, abnormally large and spherical breasts, scarred, pierced or tattooed skin, etc.) or figures and functionalities that are not 'naturally', normally found attractive (baldness, flabbiness, a combination of male and female sexual traits, etc.). Even if some such practices may be met with widespread or near-universal repugnance, in a liberal, human rights abiding society we must be watchful that such majoritarian repugnance does not turn into an officially enforced 'oppressive taste'. (See Chap. 16 by Brownsword, this volume) Moreover, there may be ethical reasons to encourage the aesthetic appreciation of the two types of deviance mentioned, as they may lessen the pressure put on people to conform to (possibly suspect and oppressive) norms of 'naturalness' and 'normality'. For this reason, some pro-enhancement movements align themselves with the disability rights movements, with the liberation from uniform beauty ideals, etc. as the way forward for accepting deep societal diversity (see for instance Chap. 13 by Tara Magdalinski, this volume, Carrico 2009 )

#### **4.4.3 Reshaping the Human Figure As (Mutual) Alienation**

The celebration of the peaceful cohabitation of mutually deviant lifestyles and embodiments can, however, easily turn into an overly naive neglect of the enormous practical difficulties that are raised by constant and pervasive societal friction between differently natured communities. Consider, for instance, the difficulties to manage the peaceful cohabitation of differently *cultured* communities in multicultural political constellations. Moreover, such celebration might tip over into a somewhat nonsensical appreciation for diversity and deviance for their own sake, in which the maintenance and construction of communitarian ties threatens to be neglected. As Darian Meacham argues in his contribution to this volume, perhaps not a biological but a more symbolical, *phenomenological* sense of species recognition and belonging seems to be a fundamental human need. This, however, can be historically negotiated and constructed. Indeed, in line with Dale Carrico's thoughtful though informal writing in this regard ( 2009 ), I equally wish to underscore, contra libertarian and technophile transhumanism, the primordial importance of civic and communitarian negotiation in accommodating disturbingly deviant, 'queer' (embodied) lifestyles.

To take a sports-specific example, there is a legitimate demand that the activity of differently embodied athletes can be compared in a meaningful and practicable way. For instance, it is legitimate for organizers of running meets (1) to investigate whether Oscar Pistorius, when he is taking great strides on prosthetic blades, is engaged in an activity that can still be categorized under the negotiated rubric of 'running' – and not, for instance, under a substantially different rubric of 'blading'. (2) Should substantial differences be found, a further negotiation should be engaged in to decide whether the kind and degree of the difference can be adequately assessed and compared. (3) If, after a final study, corrective circumstances can be added so as to redress irrelevant inequalities between the differently embodied athletes, it may still prove

possible to conserve both the “sweet tension of uncertainty of outcome” (Frleigh 1984 ) as well as the competition as a test of relevant capacities, most importantly as a test of character and will power, even if athletes are substantially ‘other’ or ‘alien’ towards one another. As the specifics of such methods of inclusive organization entail largely ‘logistical’ issues instead of ethical ones, I will not pursue them further here. However, for such humane, inclusive negotiations to take place, it seems imperative that the demands for dominance of innate natural talent and for *biological* instead of phenomenological species similarity be relaxed, and as I would argue together with Max Mehlman ground-breaking writing ( 2009 ) on these issues, actively discarded.

#### **4.5 Conclusion. The Unbearable Lightness of Being a Self-Made Man, Out There Playing Games**

On the one hand, doping – constructing a substantially artificialized embodiment and drawing on that embodiment to realize athletic performances – has been analysed to be neither debasing, mechanistic or dehumanizing. On the other hand, the demands for the necessary presence of natural talent, for its dominant presence, and for taking protectionist measures to ensure that natural talent remains a necessary and dominant requirement have been analysed as ‘talentocratic’ demands that can become riddled with dubious comfort-seeking, overly superficial conceptions of authenticity and agency, oppressive prejudice against deviants and in the worst case scenario: share with certain transhumanisms the flirtation with social Darwinism and literal eu-genics: holding in higher esteem those who happen to have some genetic endowment deemed better.

This is not to say that we should turn a blind eye to talent. Our talents, together with the cravings and needs that emanate from the constraints of human biology, can legitimately play a dominant role in ‘fleshing out’ the specifics of what is and what is not wholesome to pursue, as they are make up a fair part of the tangle one finds oneself thrown in (Bonte 2011 ). They are largely what make us get up in the morning and what keep us (pre)occupied throughout the day. But existentially, their role is secondary (Bayertz 2003 ): having a talent, or being natured in a certain way, does not make the cultivation of that talent or the conservation of that nature meaningful. One’s talents, one’s nature, and all the comfort and satisfaction one may draw from it, may still be both ethically dubious and existentially absurd.

We deny the depth and difficulty of human existence if we con ourselves into thinking that there is a ‘given’ human mould we all share, together with a mould with specific traits, talents and afflictions ‘given’ to each individual, that is meaningful in and of itself. We are not ‘meant’ to have the improvised, ramshackle nature given to us by the ‘Blind Watchmaker’ of natural selection ( Dawkins 2006 ; Buchanan 2011 ), nor are we ‘meant’ to continue the business of evolution, as some transhumanists would have it. Rather, we are free and forlorn – that is the (perhaps poisoned) ‘gift’ of life as a human, which spoils and makes impossible the self-evident, passive life of an animal, no matter our nostalgia for the lost comforts of that Arcadia. This existentialist self-understanding does not deliver some final blow to religion. Indeed, it can itself be a religious sensibility, such as in the hallmark 1486 text of renaissance humanism, Pico della Mirandola’s *Oratio on the Dignity of Man*, where the allegorical gods inform Man of his plight:

Adam, we give you no fixed place to live, no form that is peculiar to you, nor any function that is yours alone. According to your desires and judgment, you will have and possess whatever place to live, whatever form, and whatever functions you yourself choose. All other things have a limited and fixed nature prescribed and bounded by our laws. You, with no limit or no bound, may choose for yourself the limits and bounds of your nature.

(Mirandola 1999 [1486] )

It can also, of course, be a secular sensibility, borne from a sobering understanding of the randomness of biological evolution and an uncompromising adherence to the force of the naturalistic fallacy.

I believe we cannot, without self-deception, *choose against self-creation*. Standing on the tipping point of the tense cognitive dissonance between *finding ourselves* foundationlessly free and ruthlessly responsible on the one hand, and *wanting ourselves* to be self-evidently driven by a nature that was meaningfully given on the other hand, we cannot abdicate from choosing some resolution of the dissonance. But we can make a fundamental choice on how we will rise to that existential occasion. We can either create a counterfactual belief that we are *not* the creator and carrier of our own life project, or we can (with courageous humility even) accept and affirm our self-creating predicament. Apparently dubious, counterfactual beliefs in nature's normativity can be a highly wholesome coping practice – invigorating mythmaking to provide repose from existential gravitas. I have argued that this can be an enjoyable opiate integrated in a virtuous art of living, when dosed in good measure. But as a constant belief, held in earnest and motivationally rooted in a “fear of freedom” (Fromm 1960 [1942] ), it becomes a cause of great ethical concern.

I cite in full agreement that “[a]n untroubled soul in a troubling world is a shrunken human being” (Kass 2003 ) and that we must not “remake nature, including human nature, to serve our purposes and satisfy our desires” (Sandel 2007: 26–27). Yet my argument leads me to conclude that Kass’ and Sandel’s proposals may ironically root in the very indignities they rail against. Building on humanist-existentialist strands of thought, the violation of human dignity occurs not by transgressing supposedly ethically charged natural constraints on our existence. In a sense, to the contrary. A person violates her dignity when she falls beneath a threshold of maintaining moral character and realizing virtues, such as truthfulness and moral courage. Now, when a person denies our foundationlessly free and ruthlessly responsible predicament, and grounds her denial not in rational rebuttal but in a belief for which no argument has been given and which is conspicuously convenient ( *in casu*, that one has been given a meaningful nature in which one can find true purpose and authentic fulfilment), then indignity seems nigh.

I have sought to identify and critique a cluster of ‘talentocratic’ assumptions on which much intrinsic, categorical anti-doping thinking seems to be premised, and have pitted it against a positive existentialist account of human dignity. Pending further scrutiny, I would wager that it is better – not in terms of contentment and happiness but in terms of dignity and the love of truth – to first gauge our god- and nature-forsaken condition to the fullest, and then from that vacuous and circular predicament, testify of our will to live in truth, beauty and goodness by improvising something out of ourselves – body and all – in a ‘virtuous exploration of bodily virtuosity’.

Perhaps, beneath the governing taboos and odium in public life today, at intersections of virtue-ethical undercurrents with clandestine doping underworlds, such virtuous explorations have already been undertaken in more or less erratic, confused, conflicted or understated ways. Even if contemporary doping practices would all prove to be deeply corrupted by the thicket of *other* problems non- intrinsic to doping itself (and should space permit I would argue that such corruptions do indeed run deep and wide given the perfectionist, puritan, individualist, domineering and exploitative values running through contemporary capitalist culture, sports culture surely not excluded), that would still not allow us to categorically conclude against doping. Instead, it would call on us to combat those corruptions not from ‘anti-doping’ grounds, but from an understanding of all that needs to be put in place before doping can be done in dignity.

## Notes



<sup>1</sup> For a strict philosophical inquiry to be maximally revealing, thought experiments should be restricted by nothing more than logical possibility – a classic example of which, also relevant in the debates on human enhancement, would be Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* ( 1984 ). If one demands realism, or even *actual occurrence* or *feasibility in a foreseeable near future*, one risks 'ontological parochialism', obscuring conceptual clarity. That said, the more realistic and contemporary we can construe a situation in which doping would not be intrinsically problematic, the more fruitful such findings will be for the eventual goal of the development of *practicable* policies, as it would allow us to identify, should they exist, (1) *actual* doping practices which are *now* receiving undue denunciation and persecution, and/or (2) *feasible* or *foreseeable* doping practices which are permissible and perhaps laudable to prepare and pursue.

<sup>2</sup> See the distinction made between individual surpassing doping and species surpassing doping.

<sup>3</sup> This dynamic of identification based on recognition + random elevation is, I believe, a major reason of the immense popularity of hero stories such as Spiderman, Popeye, Asterix & Obelix etc. The basic narrative is that of an Everyman, with which the reader of the story can readily identify, who has the luck of experiencing an extraordinary intervention (being bitten by a mutated spider, eating super-spinach, drinking a druid brew or being drenched in it as a child), after which he comes to obtain special, superior capacities and his life is elevated to that of a superhero. Should the same fortune ever befall the reader (and it is only random that it has not), she may start leading the life of a superhero, too. Similarly, should the natural lottery have given the audience member the genetic hand now dealt to the top athlete (and it is only random that things turned out otherwise), the now audience member who goes unnoticed would have been the glorified star in the arena. Oddly, we seem to adore 'doping sinners' in these cartoon stories.

<sup>4</sup> For an insightful critique of common mistakes in thinking through the 'natural lottery', applying among other things the non-identity problem to these issues, see Hurley ( 2002 ).

<sup>5</sup> As such it may have a *secondary* role in helping to determine what might improve human welfare (see for instance Bayertz 2003 ), but even then it can just as well be that all manner of 'unnatural' practices may make us feel even better.

<sup>6</sup> On the contemporary problem of responsibility explosion in general, see Schwartz ( 2004 ).

<sup>7</sup> In my rendition of the *Homo ludens*, I add the dimension of the self-made body to the existentialist understanding presented by Suits, who had already radicalized the existentialist dimension of the *Homo ludens* when compared to Huizinga.

<sup>8</sup> Indirectly and often via the process of sexual selection, the mere capacity to mimic the presence of a hereditary trait can sometimes suffice to become a fitness-increasing trait itself (De Block and Dewitte 2009 ).

<sup>9</sup> See the analysis of such lines of reasoning in Trijsje Franssen's (Chap. 6 ) contribution to this volume.

<sup>10</sup> Although certainly, those susceptible to sloth (and this group may well be demographically very large) may indeed use such baseline-lifting doping as a way to lessen the need for their own active agency.

<sup>11</sup> Consider in this regard Denis Hauw's (Chap. 12 ) analysis in this volume of how contemporary elite cyclists often revert to dope simply in order to cope with the excruciating demands put on their natural constitutions by organizers and audiences.

<sup>12</sup> As I believe these concerns are relatively less profound and as space does not permit further extensive argument, I will deal with this third set of intrinsic objections, those on defiguring 'dehumanization', in a more brief manner, and several intriguing twists and turns will therefore be left unpursued here.

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Tara Magdalinski's (Chap. 13 ) contribution to this volume on the 'natural romanticism' that fueled the creation of modern sports as a wholesome activity. In addition, however, John Hoberman describes in his contribution the long history of the *Leistungsprinzip* or Performance Principle as a motor of modern sport. For more on the long history of human intervention in nature in the name of increased productivity and efficiency, see Claude Olivier Doron's introduction to Missa and Nouvel ( 2011 ).

<sup>14</sup> For instance, in his contribution to this volume Andreas De Block (Chap. 8 ) examines the possibility to ground the categorical objection to doping on such widespread, evolutionary rooted distastes. The anti-doping project would then no longer have to argue for the increasingly contested position that doping is categorically *unethical*, but instead could take the more robust line of argument that doping is categorically *un-aesthetical*.



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