What we can – and can’t — learn about the ethics of enhancement by thinking about sport

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In “The misguided quest for the ethics of enhancement”, Tom Murray (2012) makes two related claims. First, he argues that “understanding the ethics of enhancement is deeply dependent on context” (PAGE NO.). Second, he suggests that, as a consequence, we should not look for “a single all-purpose ethics for every form of human enhancement” (PAGE NO.). In this brief response, I will argue that while Murray is correct in the first of these claims, there is an important sense in which he is wrong in the second. His focus on the ethics of enhancement in sport serves him well in illustrating how our reasons to embrace or resist technological change as it impacts on athletes and players depends crucially on “why we play” and in particular on nature of the excellences made possible by the current rules of the game. However, the thing about life is that the “rules” are unknown and the meaning of participation and the excellences it makes possible are widely disputed. For this reason, a focus on the ethics of sport serves us less well when it comes to the larger question of the attitude we should take towards “human enhancement”. In the context of the profound disputes about the nature of the good in modern liberal societies, we may indeed need a single, robust, theoretical framework through which to resolve questions about enhancement – although whether this is best thought of as an “ethics” or a “politics” of enhancement is a further (and difficult) question. Regardless of how such a framework is conceived, Murray’s observations about the importance of context, the significance of competition, and the attractions of a “public health ethics” approach, all serve to alert us to just how difficult the task of developing an ethics for human enhancement more generally is likely to be.

Murray begins his essay with some timely reminders of just how difficult it is likely to be to resolve even the question of whether a particular technological interventions to improve upon human capacities is an “enhancement” or not. The ultimate impact such changes must be evaluated in the context of a realistic appreciation of the complexity of human biology, in the long term, and in an awareness that the social consequences of technology are often unpredictable and hard to evaluate. All of these qualifications and hard tasks are routinely skipped over in the contemporary literature on human enhancement, which all-too-often blithely proceeds from an optimistic interpretation of a few early studies involving rats or nematodes to a confident claim about the benefits that these technologies will provide in humans. However, at a deeper level, these cautionary notes leave the larger philosophical debate about enhancement untouched. Sensible advocates of enhancement will simply concede that it
is important to be appropriately confident that particular technologies do constitute enhancements before we proceed to embrace them.¹

The bulk of Murray’s chapter consists in a nuanced discussion of enhancement in sport, with which I find myself entirely in agreement. His treatment of the topic shows clear traces of — and benefits from — an extended history of engagement with actual sports people and sporting organisations, which, again, has been sadly lacking in the larger debate about enhancement in sport. He argues convincingly that whether the introduction of particular technologies into particular sports should be embraced or resisted depends upon the extent to which they enhance or detract from the values that participants seek to realise in these sports — and also on their implications for the health and safety of athletes understood through a public health framework. As an interested observer of the emergence of the debate about enhancement in sport in the last decade, I must admit that I have struggled to understand how anyone could believe otherwise. Even the pursuit of “maximum performance”, which Savulescu, Foddy, and Clayton (2004) have advocated — and which Murray rightly dismisses as a plausible account of what athletes are seeking — requires a non-trivial account of what “performance” consists in and therefore both of the goals of participants and of our intuitions about why participation in a particular sport is something to be admired. If the goal in, for instance, the 100 m dash was simply for a person to cover a distance of 100 m in the shortest time possible, there would be nothing incongruous about the suggestion that we should fire the athletes out of cannons, or allow them to take their place at the track behind the wheel of Formula One racing cars. There is nothing wrong with Formula One racing, of course, but it is a different sport to sprinting and makes possible different excellences. Similarly, competition between genetically enhanced athletes — or athletes taking performance enhancing pharmaceuticals — is a different sport than competition between athletes allowed only a more modest range of performance enhancing techniques. Would the former be a better sport than the latter? Well, that depends, as Murray points out, on how much we value the skills and excellences athletes could demonstrate in each (the skill of the genetic engineers who “enhanced” them versus strength-of-will in training?) and also — importantly — on the impact that participating in one sport rather than the other would have on the health and safety of athletes. As, in many cases, there will be little to choose between two closely related sets of excellences, or there may only be historical reasons for preferring one to another, judgements as to which technological enhancements to permit in sporting contests will often rightly turn on the implications for the health and safety of athletes of allowing participants to use some new technology.

Yet the clarity of Murray’s discussion and the strength of his conclusions are made possible in a large part precisely by the fact that sports do have rules and traditions that make possible some excellences rather than others and that also may serve as a resource and a basis to ground arguments about which excellences they promote — and their value. If there is room for argument as to whether it is good bowling or good batting that constitutes the highest form of excellence in cricket, there is no question that it is not skill at sword fighting or the ability to lift heavy weights. That is to say, if arguments about the ethics of enhancement must make reference to context, we are fortunate enough in the debate about enhancement in sport to have access to a rich and determinate context.

When we turn from the ethics of enhancement in sport to the ethics of human enhancement more generally, the attempt to resolve ethical questions with reference to claims about context is immediately much more controversial. In modern multi-ethnic, multicultural, and multi-faith societies, there is little consensus on the point of life, on which

¹ There is, of course, an important and difficult debate to be had about just how confident we need to be in order to be “appropriately confident” that an intervention counts as an enhancement and about who should make this decision. Given the many uncertainties that beset technological interventions in the cause of therapy and, indeed, our adoption of technology more generally, the level of confidence necessary that enhancements will be beneficial may in fact be quite low. Moreover, in liberal societies there is at least a prima facie ground to believe that it should be up to individuals to decide how much risk they are willing to take on in pursuit of some desired benefit. Advocates of enhancement tend to be those individuals who — on paper at least — are willing to accept larger risks in the hope that some particular technology will ultimately prove beneficial. On the other hand, the fact that many enhancements will produce significant negative externalities argues in favour of a democratic process of determining which (purported) enhancements individuals should be allowed to trial.
are the highest human excellences, or on anything approaching the “rules of the game”. Arguments based on context may well therefore founder on a lack of agreement about the relevant context and its content.

Of course, there may be specific areas of human life where the range of disagreement is narrower and reference to context can therefore do slightly more work. It is doubtful that a drug that promoted hysterical laughter would find much of a market as a “sexual enhancement” or that a carcinogen would be lauded as a “health enhancement”. But most of the enhancements with which the “enhancement debate” is concerned will have impacts across a range of different spheres of human life, such that the appropriate “context” to use to assess them will be a whole human life. Moreover, even in the special cases where technological interventions affect only a specific arena of human life there is likely to be deep disagreement about the nature, meaning, and value of goods within the arena. Is sex “about” reproduction, love, or fun? Is it “healthier” to live a longer life with a moderate quality of life each day or a shorter life with a higher daily quotient of well-being? Different answers to these questions will generate different conclusions as to what counts as an enhancement in the relevant sphere and about the value of different enhancements.

The traditional liberal solution to problems which involve questions about the meaning of human life is to leave it up to individuals to resolve these for themselves as long as their chosen solutions do not prevent others from doing the same or harm others in some other way. It is tempting to conclude that to adopt this approach to enhancement is already to propose “a single all-purpose ethics for every form of human enhancement” of the sort that Murray denies we need. At the very least it is to converge upon a single all-purpose theoretical and policy framework for general-purpose enhancements in a liberal society. Strictly speaking, though, at least in its most plausible and well-known variant, such this liberal approach motivates a political rather than an ethical framework for enhancement. That is to say, it tells us that people should be permitted to adopt enhancements unless their doing so harms others or restricts their freedom — it does not settle the question of the ethics of their doing so. Still, if context cannot play the role that Murray attributes to it, this may be all that is available to us.

However, Murray’s discussion of the ethics of enhancement in sport also touches upon two related phenomena which together suggest that this liberal solution is much more problematic than is generally acknowledged.

First, Murray draws attention in passing to the role played by competition in sport in driving the uptake of performance-enhancing technologies. Those who wish to be able to win against others who have the option of adopting performance-enhancing technology must embrace enhancement even where the enhancement concerned is known to be dangerous to those who use it. Second, Murray recognises that the fact of “human interdependence” means that this dynamic needs to be taken seriously as a way in which the actions of those embracing enhancement impact upon the well-being of others and suggests that a “public health ethics” will sometimes justify restricting individual access to enhancement for the sake of “the well-being of a population” (PAGE NO.).

The first of these observations is also relevant to enhancement outside of the context of sport. There are significant aspects of life in contemporary capitalist societies, such as the pursuit of wealth or social status, that are also “inherently, relentlessly competitive” (Frank 1985). Indeed, the ideology of such societies encourages the idea that this is true even of parts of life that are not. Thus, the moment citizens begin to feel that particular enhancements can provide a competitive advantage in the struggle for these goods in they will feel compelled to adopt them (Kavka 1994). Moreover, establishing a rat race or arms race is not the only way in which individuals’ adoption of enhancements may affect others. The relationship between enhancements and the context of the human activity that they enhance works both ways. If it becomes possible to love someone by taking a drug that produces love, then the meaning of love, and how we respond to it, would change dramatically. As Erik Parens (1995) and Bill McKibbin (2003) have each argued convincingly, the meaning of many of our most rewarding experiences is

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2 For an attempt to defend a framework of this sort in the context of debates about genetic human enhancement, see Agar (2004). For a critique, see Sparrow (2010).
intimately related to our limits: by what we can’t do, as much as what we can. Importantly, such changes in context and meaning are not confined to the individuals who choose to adopt or not adopt enhancements. Because meanings are social, once a significant percentage of the population has altered their capacities by adopting an enhancement, the meaning of related activities and experiences will be changed for everyone.

In life, even more than in sport, then, the fact of human interdependence means that we cannot afford to look at the ethics of enhancement solely at the level of individual choices. This, in turn, means that the “liberal” approach to the ethics of enhancement described above is manifestly inadequate. Many, perhaps even most, enhancements are likely to both harm and restrict the liberty of others, by generating destructive rat races and through their consequences for social meanings that play a vital role in constructing a good human life.

Yet the “public health model” that Murray advocates as a way of negotiating the tension between individual liberty and public good in the context of enhancement in sport is also extremely problematic when we turn to the larger question of the ethics of human enhancement. When sporting organisations and officials are regulating sport, it is uncontroversial that the health and safety of athletes and players should be a pre-eminent concern. However, the values that government should promote in society as a whole are highly contested. Indeed, once we move away from the promotion of “health” – itself a more plural concept than is often acknowledged – the very idea that we are justified in sacrificing individual liberty for the sake of public benefit is controversial. It should be especially controversial in the context of debates about human enhancement given the shameful record of human rights violations for the sake of the “nation” or “population” in the history of eugenics (Sparrow 2011).

Should significant human enhancement become possible, therefore, the fact of human interdependence means that decisions about enhancement should not be left up to individuals. We will, indeed, need a more-or-less-general “ethics of enhancement” of the sort that Murray disavows. Yet we cannot rely straightforwardly upon a “public health” model to provide one. We are left, then, with Murray’s original insight about the importance of context in determining what counts as an enhancement and how we should respond to the prospect of changes in the sorts of excellences that participation in important social practices makes possible. The relevant “context”, however, will be the whole of human life. Debate about the ethics of enhancement will therefore require discussions about the projects and values we, as a society, think that it valuable to pursue. Similarly, settling upon the nature of the “public good” that should constrain the individual liberty to adopt enhancements will require engaging in arguments about deeply contested matters of value. These are both projects that modern multicultural societies have tended to shy away from.

The main lesson that thinking about enhancement in sport can teach us, then, is just how difficult it will be to come up with the necessary “ethics of enhancement” once we move from the relatively narrow and uncontroversial context of sport to the larger context of human existence. Yet there is a further lesson here for politics more generally. Human interdependence is not confined to enhancement. Other technologies impact upon the context in which we make our choices and the sorts of values it is possible to pursue. Indeed, many forms of social, cultural, and political action, carried out by individuals and groups, are either intended to reshape the stock of meanings and values that constitute the context of our cultural and political lives or inevitably do so regardless of their initiators’ intentions. Perhaps surprisingly, the lessons – both positive and negative — that we can draw from Murray’s thoughtful discussion of the ethics of enhancement in sport generalise. Context matters, both for how we evaluate our lives, and for what it is possible to do in them. Any politics that does not recognise this will fail to adequately safeguard both individual liberty and the public good. Taking context seriously, as Murray insists we should, on the other hand, requires a broader and more vigorous political debate that confronts questions about meaning and value that a traditional liberal politics abjures.

References


