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Ethics and Genetic Enhancement in Sport

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Ethics, Enhancement, & Sport

- The meaning of sport as a human activity
- Excellence in sport as expression of:
 - Natural talents
 - Virtuous perfection of those talents



Objections to Doping Control in Sport

- Claim of Incoherency
- Line drawing problem
- “Resistance is futile”
- Appeal to individual liberty
- Romantic/Promethean view



The Incoherency Claim

- No conceptual, ethical or practical distinction among different means of enhancing sport performance
- The marathoner's shoes



The Line Drawing Problem

- **Key claims:**
 - All possible lines are arbitrary
 - Arbitrariness is fatal flaw
- **Conflates two meanings of “arbitrary”**
 - As unprincipled, indefensible
 - As reasonable response when
 - Drawing SOME line is defensible
 - Placing line IN THIS PLACE likewise



“Resistance is Futile”

- Not a first-order ethical claim
- Primarily two empirical predictions
 - Control will be impossible
 - Bad consequences ensue
- Control is never perfect
- Depends upon
 - Public conviction
 - Effective enforcement



The Argument from Individual Liberty

- Presumption in favor of liberty
- Paternalism difficult to defend with adult athletes
- Hastings Center project
 - Coercive impact of drugs in sport: The unlevel field



Romantic/Promethean View

- Humans as self-creators
- Understand cultural and philosophical context and implications
- Valorizes unfettered will and self manipulation
- Relation to human flourishing?



Romantic/Promethean: Case of Anorexia

- “Anorexia is the cultivation of a specific image as an *image*—it is a purely artificial creation and that is why it is so admired. Will alone produces it and maintains it against considerable odds.”
- (Noelle Casky, 2003: 129)



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Triumph of the Performance Principle

- Maximum performance by any means, at any cost
- Power lifting: drug free and ?
- Unavoidable consequence of refusing to set limits
- Greatly increased risk
 - (rules governing a practice ≠ indefensible paternalism)
- Threat to spirit of sport



Ethics of Enhancement in Context

- The non-trembling neurosurgeon
- The point of the practice:
The “spirit of sport”
- Not the means per se, rather
their relationship to the goals
of the practice, values, and
human flourishing



Challenge of Genetic Enhancement in Sport

- What do we value in sport?
 - Natural talents
 - Virtuous perfection of those talents
- What do we disvalue?
 - Distortions of relationship between natural talent, virtues, and athletic excellence



What makes a talent “natural”?

- **Complex phenotypes**
 - Genome as ecosystem
 - Genes interact complexly with each other genes, with external environment
- **Genetic differences in general not rigidly determinative for human behavior**
 - See behavioral genetics report at www.thehastingscenter.org



Differences in Natural Talents

- As vicious inequalities to be redressed?
 - Vonnegut’s “handicapper general”
- As expressions of human variation to be celebrated?
- Olympic movement opts for the latter
 - Alternative: Romantic/Promethean triumph of the performance principle



A Clash of Meanings

- How should we understand the meaning of the Games, the spirit of sport?
 - Exhibition of maximum human performance, human self manipulation?
 - Celebration of human differences—variations in natural talents admirably perfected



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