

Lessons from Lance - moralities of the human cyborg

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[Darian Meacham](#) [1] 23 November 2012

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The distinctions between 'natural' and 'artificial' performance enhancement are largely arbitrary - humans are a thoroughly technologised species. It is the *social* context of Armstrong's actions that is the true site of moral failings.



[7] Image: Bohman

When news of [USADA's report](#) [8] on US Postal's and Lance Armstrong's doping and his subsequent refusal to contest its accusations broke, many of us who take a theoretical and ethical interest in questions surrounding 'athletic enhancement' offered a sort of Gaelic shrug (bof!) and remained rather ambivalent. What seemed most shocking about the findings was not that Lance had taken performance enhancing drugs, but rather the scope and audacity of the doping, and that it had gone on supposedly undetected for so long.

The more skeptical, like myself, remarked that the lack of detection was not that surprising given the enormous commercial interest in Lance as a cancer surviving hero, who would finally make cycling

into more than a niche sport in the huge US market. Though allegations that the UCI (cycling's international body) turned a blind eye to positive tests have yet to be substantiated. And how could anyone be so surprised that an athlete who had dominated a sport that was doped nearly from top to bottom would himself be doping? Did it even matter? If all the athletes are on drugs isn't the playing field (or the road in this case) as level as it would be if nobody were doping? The real problem was the arbitrary doping rules, not the enhancement itself. Anyway, cycling already relied on cutting edge technology, was there such a difference in adding a space age polymer to the bike and riders using pharmaceutical performance enhancers, or a bit extra of their own blood that they had extracted and cleverly saved for later?

Some went one step further. The American philosopher Alva Noë chastised the ranks of moralizing commentators, revved up on caffeine and nicotine and filing reports and tweets from smart phones and tablets attached to their hands like cyborg appendages, for their hypocrisy and near-sightedness. [Noë correctly points](#) [9] out that the line between permissible and prohibited technologically mediated enhancement is arbitrary. Why should carbo-loading under the watch of doctors and nutritionists be encouraged as smart practice, but 'blood-doping' forbidden? He also correctly notes that the difference between nature and artifice in these contexts is blurry at best, and when closely scrutinized, non-existent — it's all natural. Rather than penalizing athletes, coaches, doctors, etc. for finding ingenious ways of embodying the Olympic motto '*Citius, Altius, Fortius*' (Faster, Higher, Stronger), they should be encouraged.

On a broader societal scale, this means embracing what Noë calls our '[cyborg nature](#) [10]'. The success of our species, he argues, is coeval with the 'integration of human living with the innovative and productive use of tools'. It's not just by chance or luck that we use tools from time to time to make things easier. We use them all the time, and our use of them organizes pretty much every aspect of our lives. Whether we like it or not humans and technology have become one in so many ways that we are not just born technologists, we are technologized through and through—'natural born cyborgs' as another philosopher, Andy Clark, puts it. [Scientific research](#) [11] into the way that techno-cultural change has altered evolutionary development seemingly puts paid to this claim. With regard to Armstrong, Noë writes: 'He is a trailblazer. One of the greats. He didn't win races on his own. No, like each of us in our social embeddings, he created an organization, one drawing on other people, and the creative and effective use of technology, the mastery of biochemistry, to go places and do things that most of us never will, and that no one ever had before him.'

Defenders of Lance are a little harder to come by now that [details](#) [12] of his bullying, threats, and coercion of teammates, rival cyclists, and support staff have been made public. Lance turned out not to be a technological monster but a moral one. He may have taken Noë's advice a bit too far, stopping at nothing to enhance himself and win, even ruining the careers of others and defaming anyone who dared stand in his way (he publically accused a team masseuse of being a drunken prostitute after she spoke to journalists about his doping). Honor is apparently not as innate as the drive to meld with technology in the quest for sporting glory.

Lance aside, I pretty much agree with Noë about our intertwinement with technology. One point where I object however is that it seems question begging to argue against a nature-culture boundary, and then to insist that humans by nature seek to transform themselves through the use of technology. Therein I think lies the greater lesson that Lance might provide for debates on the use and legitimacy of 'human enhancement technology'. Calling something natural does not excuse us from examining the cultural context in which it occurs. One of the things that our intimate species relation with technology teaches us is that culture is natural and nature is cultural.

Noë suggests that the lessons from sport (outlined above) apply to the larger sphere of life *per se*. Is this the case? I think we would do well to remember how it is that Lance was able to go where no man had gone before for so long, through a reign of terror and coercion that ultimately threatens to bring down his sport and has damaged many other lives. Noë would argue that it's the ban on enhancement that brought this about. I think it's a bit more complex than that.

Let's shift spheres for the moment and look at the case of cognitive enhancing drugs. There is evidence of increased use of all sorts of supposedly 'cognitive enhancing' pharmaceuticals in secondary and higher education as well as in high pressure and demanding workplaces including

such varied fields as academic research and log-haul trucking. Like Lance, many students and professionals want to be the best at what they do, and when you operate in a highly demanding or competitive sphere this can mean using a little technological enhancement in the form of a pharmaceutical wakefulness agent, or maybe in the future a neuro-implant of one sort or another.

Many would argue that this is the free choice of students, philosophers or truck drivers, and good on them for embracing their species-being through a network that draws on the creative and effective use of technology. Not every student needs to or can go to Harvard or Cambridge, if you don't want to enhance yourself, you can be perfectly happy at a less prestigious university or being less efficient at your job than you could be. Yes, there may be dangers to taking some drugs or inserting a computer processor under the skin of the skull, but these are the risks one can choose to take (or not) on the path to greatness. There are also dangers in drinking loads of Redbull and studying all night or pressuring your kid to stick with those piano lessons.

But in our present socio-economic cultural context and its relations of production, there is also a high degree of coercion involved when it comes to enhancement (whether in cycling or in the wider world). There is good reason, I think, to worry that as enhancements become more available and more refined this will get worse. You might not shed a tear for elite high school students pining for the privilege of an Ivy League university, or for an academic trying to finish her grant application. But consider for a moment that supposed cognitive enhancers are also being given to children who don't quite conform to the norm of a well-behaved future homo-economicus (a rational, economically productive individual), or children who might just need a bit more support and care to function at an age-typical level, but don't get it because parents and teachers are unable to provide it. In the words of [Dr. Michael Anderson](#) [13], who prescribes Adderall to low-income students struggling in elementary school: 'We've decided as a society that it's too expensive to modify the kid's environment. So we have to modify the kid.' In such cases there is coercion, not quite of the type Lance applied to riders who refused to dope or testified against him but pretty similar. The message is the same: get on board the enhancement wagon or get left behind.

So what's wrong with that? We might say that there is little difference between a pharmaceutical enhancement and an environmental change. In the end, the goal of both is to modify the kid; one just gets there a little faster. In the forward march of the species towards greater integration with technology, risk adverse luddites will be left behind. This has always been the case and will continue to be. But as with taking Erythropoietin (aka EPO, a common enhancement drug in cycling) there may be dangerous side effects of taking some cognitive enhancers; we just don't know.

In sport, some risk is necessary, as Noë says, 'Sports are not good for you' (at least not at elite level). If cognitive enhancement becomes the condition for success in highly competitive schools and universities and later in the job market, and perhaps eventually, by extension, for living a comfortable life, then we are demanding that children expose themselves to a level of risk that most of us, unless you are a right wing libertarian transhumanist, would not feel comfortable with in order that they may have a chance at success.

Many argue that we need to take these kind of risks to be able to address the kind of big problems that humanity is facing and new problems that we will face in the future, such as poverty, hunger, climate change. We've created these risks so now we need to take more to try and mitigate them. The only problem with this line of reasoning is it's a sham. We already possess the cognitive capacity to deal with these problems, just like Dr Anderson's poor young patients possess the capacity to function at the level of their richer, better supported peers. What we lack is the appropriate cultural context.

Just as importantly, enhancement only makes sense against the backdrop of an ideal norm against which human capacity and function is measured. In cycling this norm is unproblematic - go faster. In the broader social sphere it's quite clear that cognitive enhancement (as is normally discussed) is geared towards a certain type of rationality. Aldous Huxley may have taken mescaline to open the doors of perception, but this is unlikely to help you succeed as an economically productive member of society. But as we all know, productive society needs all kinds of brains, not just ones that are economically productive given a certain set of socio-economic relations of production. Widespread use of cognitive enhancement presents the risk of cognitive homogenization.

Many philosophers say that this is a bogus fear; human desires and ideas about the good life are too wide and varied for this to happen. This position, Polyanna like, underplays the coercive force of the dominant socio-economic forces in shaping social norms and behavior. The debate over the role of higher education in the UK is a good example of this. No one in power argues that education is about creating diversified notions of what ideal cognitive performance and the good life is. Education is about making people economically productive under certain relations of production, the same holds already and will hold for various forms of enhancement. It also true in cycling. Rather than sacrifice their livelihood many cyclists chose to dope even when they didn't want to whether for moral or health reasons. Lance became the enforcer of this particular socio-economic order (yes, cycling is about money, and for most of the riders it's a job like any other).

Does being human mean being technologized through and through? Yes, I think so. Writing, for example, is perhaps the greatest technological enhancement of all time. It is what I think finally set us apart from the rest of the animal kingdom and gives us our nature (a cultural development gives us our nature). But our technological embeddedness gets its meaning from our social, political and economic context. Many philosophers, especially liberal ones, are quick to forget just how coercive these contexts are, and when they are technologically reinforced they becomes all the more so. The lesson that we should take from Lance is that technological enhancement of our bodies and minds cannot even be discussed outside of the context of a discussion of social, political, and economic relations. This is why Lance's doping went from being neutral, even laudable, to completely reprehensible.

**A shorter version of this piece was published at the [Huffington Post](#) [14]*

Topics: Civil society
Culture
Ideas

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 About the author

Darian Meacham is senior lecturer in philosophy at the University of the West of England, where he specialises in phenomenology and political philosophy. He blogs about politics and philosophy at www.post-europe.org.uk [16]



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[8] <http://cyclinginvestigation.usada.org/>

[9]

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/13.7/2012/08/06/158156923/legalize-it-an-argument-for-doping-in-sports>

[10] <http://www.npr.org/blogs/13.7/2012/08/24/160017038/making-peace-with-our-cyborg-nature>

[11] <http://www.nature.com/nrg/journal/v11/n2/abs/nrg2734.html>

[12] <mailto:http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/blog/2012/oct/11/lance-armstrong-dope-cheat-bully>

[13] http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/09/health/attention-disorder-or-not-children-prescribed-pills-to-help-in-school.html?nl=todaysheadlines&emc=edit_th_20121009&_r=0

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