ON THE TEMPTATIONS OF DOPING

Moral Relativism and the Tour de France

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Ask many Canadians where they were in 1988 when Ben Johnson won the men’s 100-metre dash at the Seoul Olympics, and the reply will come quickly. Given that track and field is not a sport in which Canadian athletes have traditionally excelled, some even rank this sporting moment as one of our nation’s best, up there with Canada’s win in the 1972 hockey summit series with Russia. These same Canadians will also probably add that Ben Johnson being stripped of his Olympic gold medal for doping was one of the country’s most embarrassing and humiliating sports moments. The victory and its aftermath are forever etched in the minds of many.

In the wake of that 1988 embarrassment, Canada has seen a federal commission (the Dubin inquiry) investigate drug use in sport, as well as the appointment of a ministerial task force, parliamentary committee reports on the topic, the formation of the Canadian Policy Against Doping in Sport, the creation of the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, which administers the Canadian Anti-Doping Program, and the basing of the World Anti-Doping Agency in Montréal (largely thanks to the efforts of Denis Coderre and Richard Pound). Canadians have thus had a great deal of exposure to the issue of doping in sport. Although Canada is known to many other countries for fairness and tolerance, it has been viewed by some countries as extreme to so openly castigate itself for cheating in sport. The Canadian attitude
toward doping also raises interesting questions. Given the pressure on Canadian athletes to perform, and what is often viewed as the prevalence of doping in some successful countries, some might ask if there a double standard at work here? Are we expecting too much from our athletes, when other athletes from other countries seem to be given more flexibility?

This chapter will consider more recent international doping scandals that have occurred in France. In particular, the Tour de France and cyclist Lance Armstrong, who, before his use of drugs was exposed in 2012 by the US Anti-Doping Agency, was credited with having won the Tour de France seven times in a row, from 1999 to 2005. In accordance with the philosophical principle of charity, I will examine the nature and cultural function of the Tour de France, with a view to arriving at a more complete understanding of why riders such as Armstrong are tempted to engage in doping in the Tour de France. Not everyone would agree that athletes who use drugs deserve the benefit of this kind of sympathetic review. However, having interviewed Lance Armstrong while completing research for the World Anti-Doping Agency, and having observed both the worldwide increase in the loss of athletes’ rights to privacy that current doping-control protocols entail and the very high risks that competitive sports oblige many athletes to take, I feel that it is important to assess whether any acceptable rationale exists for doping in sports like the Tour de France.

Simply put, the principle of charity states that we should seek the most intelligible possible interpretation of another person’s words and actions. Since receiving its first major elaboration by Willard Van Orman Quine, the principle has been formulated in several ways. Quine’s interest was with “obvious truths,” that is, statements based on empirical observation or on logical reasoning, which, he argued, should be interpreted so as to maximize agreement. Donald Davidson extended the principle of charity, which he came to refer to as the principle of rational accommodation, to include statements that were not in the nature of obvious truths, thereby broadening Quine’s formulation. In so doing, he shifted the emphasis from maximizing agreement to “optimizing” intelligibility. According to Davidson, when we abide by the principle of charity, we attempt to make the maximum possible sense of the statements of others, regardless of their formal character. If someone says or does something that fails to make sense to us or that seems to us incorrect or morally offensive, we should not immediately assume that the person’s words and actions have no rational basis. We should begin by making an effort to understand, rather than to evaluate. Language philosopher Richard Grandy reformulated the principle of charity as the “principle of humanity,” according to which, when we are
choosing between different possible interpretations, we must “bear in mind that the speaker is a person and has certain basic similarities to ourselves.”

The principle of charity thus involves a methodological presupposition of underlying coherence, one that requires us to set aside our preconceptions about an argument, a topic, or a belief (in this case, the view that doping is ethically unacceptable) in an attempt to gain an understanding of the actions of the other person. Suspending judgment in this way frees the mind from conditioned responses and enables it to absorb and understand the new. At the same time, in order to achieve genuine empathy, we must also equip ourselves with as broad an understanding as possible of the circumstances under which the other person’s actions took place. So with this perspective, let us now consider what may be one of the strongest arguments in favour of doping (in this case in the Tour de France).

A STRONG ARGUMENT FOR DOPING IN THE TOUR DE FRANCE: MORAL RELATIVISM

A common argument for justifying an action that may appear ethically questionable—and possibly the strongest argument with regard to doping in the Tour de France—is that based on moral relativism. Moral relativism (also known as ethical relativism) is most often associated with the position that deep and widespread moral disagreements exist, and the justification of moral judgments is not absolute but relative to a particular group of persons: “What’s right for me might not be right for you.” One person may believe that a certain action, such as doping, is morally acceptable, whereas another would reject the action as unethical. At the level of personal beliefs, this means that not all athletes will agree on what constitutes ethical behaviour. As anthropologists have long observed, moral relativism also applies to whole cultures: the majority of people in one society may condone behaviour that, in another society, most people would find unacceptable. For example, the attitude toward doping that prevails among Canadians may differ somewhat from the attitude shared by most Americans. This raises the question, to which I will return later, of whether any universal moral principles exist against which we would be able to judge one person’s (or one society’s) ethical standards with regard to doping. A moral relativist would argue that no such principles exist.

Many social scientists have noted that individual moral values reflect those of the surrounding society—an observation that supports the relativist claim that ethical beliefs are culturally constructed. Furthermore, if moral attitudes are learned from the social environment, then they are not the product of independent, rational
reflection on the part of individuals: we do not separately “invent” our code of ethics. In the case of Tour de France riders, the social environment would include not only national culture in which the cyclist was raised but also the cycling subculture—that is, the community formed by the Tour de France itself—and an individual rider’s conscience would be shaped by both. Most individuals are, in fact, ethnocentric, in the sense that they tend to defer to the opinions held by the larger group. This can lead to dogmatic beliefs, as is evident in many riders’ conviction that they cannot win the Tour de France without doping, as well as to an attitude of intolerance toward those who do not adopt the group’s beliefs. Groups cohere around shared beliefs, and these beliefs need to be protected. It could be argued that this is one of the main reasons that Armstrong and other riders in the Tour got away with doping for so long after it was banned: no one was prepared betray the group by speaking out. The extreme protectionist tendencies of this particular group lead to dissenters being punished.

EXTREMES OF ENDURANCE: CYCLING AND DRUGS

"Death" is the proof that one has fought to one's maximum—fascination of going beyond one's capacity, to test one's strength. In road cycling there are no limits to human effort: it represents the ultimate motivation to achieve. The road cyclist is the only true hero in the sports world—pure willpower.7

The Tour de France is considered by many to be the ultimate endurance race, with riders covering more than three thousand kilometres in twenty stages over three weeks. Each day, riders are on their bikes for four or five hours, averaging a speed of more than forty kilometres per hour. Doping is directly related to the fact that this kind of racing may well be the hardest sport competition that exists today. According to interviews I conducted with team doctors during the 2002 Tour de France, recovery from a one-day effort at this intensity would require approximately forty-eight hours, but the maximum time that these riders get off is sixteen hours. Although a diet rich in carbohydrates and protein, as well as an increased intake of fluids, can aid recovery, many team doctors and trainers believe that ongoing medical treatment is essential to make up for the missing thirty-two hours of recovery time.8

The Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) states that, according to their research, certain core traits are needed for road cycling: endurance, perseverance, willpower, competitiveness, a strong survival instinct, the ability to tolerate loneliness and frustration, the drive to overcome obstacles, the capacity to share, and humility.9
Endurance involves human effort beyond the ordinary limits of mind and body—the human capacity to suffer without giving up. At the same time, death is indeed the proof that a maximum has been reached. No matter how much willpower and perseverance are brought to bear on it, the human body does have limits. Not very surprisingly, then, the extraordinary—indeed, inhuman—physiological demands associated with the Tour de France and other long-distance competitions are often cited as the cause of doping.

However, while one might expect that such extreme demands would be the subject of protest, at the very least among cyclists themselves, this has not been the case. Instead, whereas traditional labour unions fight for safer working conditions, cyclists have fought for their right to drugs:

The slow-downs and strikes mounted by cyclists over the past half-century have been directed, not against their extreme suffering and diminished life-spans, but against the regulation of the drugs they use to cope with stress. In fact, the idea of moderating or “humanizing” these competitions has attracted little interest among riders and their physicians.10

More recently, calls have been made for the reduction of the physiological severity of the Tour, but they do not seem to be coming from the current riders, promoters, organizers, or officials.11 It is interesting to note that many team doctors see their athletes as patients requiring medical care but are not calling for change. This phenomenon has prompted Andreas Singler and Gerhard Treutlein, among others, to comment on the striking passivity of high-performance sports physicians, who seem unwilling to address the problem of “inhuman” stress during training and competition.12 Yet, as Ivan Waddington argues, “it is this punishing schedule which largely sustains the tolerance of doping within cycling and, if we are seriously concerned about . . . the health of professional cyclists, then reducing the physical demands made upon cyclists ought to be the first priority.”13

Physicians’ organizations worldwide have taken a stance against certain other sports, such as boxing, because of safety risks, but no such stance has been taken against the Tour de France. Rather, what has become acceptable is a “reduction of harm” model that relies on medical intervention after the fact, rather than on attempts to reduce harm by reducing the physical stress of the Tour itself. This model is best illustrated in the UCI’s approach to erythropoietin (EPO), a hormone used to stimulate the production of red blood cells and hence improve oxygenation. In 1997, the UCI began testing cyclists’ hematocrit, that is, the volume percentage of red blood cells in blood. Among men, a normal hematocrit averages around 45 percent. If a cyclist’s hematocrit is found to exceed 50 percent, he is removed
from competition and prescribed a period of rest. This blood testing is justified on the grounds that it safeguards cyclists’ health, and yet no efforts are made to determine why a cyclist’s hematocrit is abnormally high. The official position of the UCI is that EPO use is forbidden, but some, including the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), have argued that this approach simply condones the use of EPO to increase the volume of red blood cells to a maximum of 50 percent. In implementing hematocrit testing, the UCI has effectively embraced a harm reduction approach, one frequently used in the treatment of drug addiction and abuse. A harm reduction approach does not take a position on the moral acceptability of a particular practice; it merely acknowledges that the practice exists and then seeks to minimize its adverse effects. For many at WADA, however, such an approach is unacceptable, as it cannot be reconciled with a zero-tolerance policy.

Some critics, including not only Waddington but John Hoberman and Verner Møller, claim that this “harm reduction” approach has largely escaped scrutiny precisely because it is applied at the point when intolerable stress appears to call for banned substances that can provide relief. These critics argue that the Tour subculture created its doping predicament many years ago by accepting intolerable stress as the price of staying in business, which had the effect of creating a doping culture that it could not defend on principle.

**DOPING EXPOSED: THE 1998 SCANDAL**

Cycling is seen by many as a transparent sport, in the sense that both the physical effort and the psychological will to win are clearly visible to spectators. There is no room to hide and little room to cheat during the event. The existence of doping threatens that perception of transparency: it is a hidden activity, a form of cheating that takes place off the road and out of sight. Thus, when the Tour de France came under attack from politicians and the media during the 1998 international doping scandal, its organizers, team managers, and athletes reacted to the assault collectively, as participants in a sport bent on defending its autonomy, values, and survival. Much the same display of solidarity happened again in the face of the Armstrong scandal.

The 1998 scandal, sometimes called the Festina affair, began when drugs, syringes, and other doping-related materials were discovered in a car belonging to one of the teams in the competition, the Festina team. Investigations subsequently revealed that drug use was widespread among Tour riders from many teams, earning the 1998 event the nickname “Tour du dopage.” One of the drugs implicated in the
scandal was EPO. In the years leading up to 1998, there had been a shift away from stimulants and toward a practice known as “blood doping,” for which EPO was the drug of choice. The revelations led to allegations that the subculture of professional cycling permitted the only semi-concealed consumption of banned performance-enhancing substances. That scandal clearly damaged the cycling community, and the Armstrong case likewise had many people, including former WADA chief Richard Pound, speculating that cycling might be removed from the Olympic Games. Once viewed as a sport that inspired loyalty and self-sacrifice, cycling has come to be viewed more cynically, essentially as an aggregation of individual entrepreneurs who cooperate in order to maintain a mutually advantageous arrangement.¹⁴

Although the extreme physical demands of long-distance cycling are perhaps the most obvious rationale for doping, some former professional cyclists have tried to explain the attraction to doping in terms of the psychology required for the sport, arguing that winning requires a willingness to engage in forms of subterfuge. In Le procès du dopage, Jean-François Quénet writes: “I am convinced . . . that the vice is inherent in the practice of elite cycling. Why? Because much of a rider’s behavior involves bluffing his opponent, getting him into difficulty, exposing him to the wind . . . in a word, fooling him! By a kind of natural extension, certain riders are inclined to see doping as a permissible strategy.”¹⁵ Potentially scandalous comments from cyclists in the public media are, however, unlikely to shock professional cyclists because the subculture of cycling understands the allure of doping.

As other riders have argued, doping has essentially become a necessary part of the sport, one that assists in sustaining the spectacle that the sponsors and public demand. In a 1969 interview, a five-time Tour de France champion—someone often viewed as one of the greatest professional cyclists in modern history—commented on the practice of taking drugs: “I dope myself. Everyone dopes himself. Obviously, we can do without them in a race, but then we will pedal [only] fifteen miles an hour. Since we are constantly asked to go faster and to make ever greater efforts, we are obliged to take stimulants.”¹⁶ Similarly, another rider was quoted as saying: “People talk so much about doping. . . . But if you don’t take anything these days, then you’re not going to get anywhere.”¹⁷ The right to work—that is, the recognition that athletes are workers doing a job—dominates this perspective, in which doping is seen as necessary to professional survival.

The accusations, indignation, and disappointment that followed the 1998 scandal challenged the idea that the cycling world is a coherent community built on shared ideals. Critics, such as Hoberman, argue that the cycling community is not, in fact, founded on cooperation, shared values, and an ethos of self-sacrifice
on behalf of shared goals. Rather, it is an arrangement that allows its members to pursue individual goals in a self-interested way that may well be compatible with community coherence only in a functional sense, in that it sustains the Tour de France as a profitable enterprise. In this view, the cycling world is a closed community that observes its own rules, rules that contribute to its reputation as a haven for drug use. As Møller argues: “Once again it is necessary to point out that there is an essential difference between the morality that prevails inside of cycling and the morality that reigns outside its special domain. It is as though we were talking about two cultures with radically different value systems.”

When the 1998 doping scandal hit cycling, civil authorities stepped in, superseding sport authorities who represented the culture of cycling. This raised the ethical question of whether the sport world is entitled to a special status that renders its members exempt from the values of outsiders. If the answer is no, then which set of values—those of the sport community itself or those of the broader culture—should be used as an ethical baseline?

**THE CONTINUED SUCCESS OF THE TOUR DE FRANCE IN THE FACE OF SCANDAL**

The Tour de France is an immense spectacle, a cultural celebration that winds its way through France. As a spectator at the 2002 Tour commented, “The riders in the Tour de France go where people live, they go to them, down their street—what other sport does that? Long-distance stage races are indeed unique in that they take the very best performers in the sport right to the doorsteps of spectators. Organizers estimate that more than eighteen million spectators view the race from the side of the road while having picnics and camping out. They line virtually every metre of the route, jostling for position hours before the riders appear. In some of the mountain stages, spectators camp out for days to claim the best spots.

The Tour de France is, in other words, an extremely successful spectacle. The defiant attitude of its supporters during the 1998 doping scandal is thus unsurprising but is important to understand. This was a view backed by a largely supportive public. As Møller points out:

The opponents of doping had a very hard time digesting the fact that the revelations and scandal-mongering media coverage of 1998 did not cause the cycling public to turn its back on the event. Given that the whole thing had been revealed to be cheating and fraud, the Tour route should have been devoid of spectators when the riders passed by. Yet the actual situation was
exactly the opposite; the public was eager to show its sympathy and support for the harried riders. It was obvious that they did not feel cheated.\textsuperscript{20}

Indeed, the public’s attitude toward doping does not always conform to the prohibitionist line that is publicly embraced by many officials, and this in itself is a matter of real social significance.

The days immediately after the scandal broke were filled with denials. Although cycling outsiders and critics questioned both the attitudes of Tour officials and the show of public support, the tacit acceptance of doping by spectators no doubt meant that, when these declarations proved to be hollow, it made little real difference.

Throughout all of this, the Tour’s continued success has been clear. It still receives blanket media coverage. The national dailies in France routinely run two or three pages, while the sports newspapers run five or six. There is full-day coverage on television, with a worldwide viewing audience estimated to be in the billions.\textsuperscript{21} Furthermore, this lack of public disapproval and rejection has occurred in cultures in which the use of illicit drugs is not generally condoned, making their norms seem both arbitrary and hypocritical.

What is behind this tolerance on the part of the public? Despite the existence of anti-doping laws dating from 1965, French society did not condemn cyclists, who were, after all, French heroes—popularly known as the “giants of the road.” Similarly, the authorities who might have prosecuted riders caught using drugs apparently concluded that the benefits of doping among cyclists (notably the triumphant success of these cyclists in the Tour) outweighed the costs to the society at large.\textsuperscript{22}

**The Tour as National Epic**

When the Tour de France was created, in 1903, it was for commercial reasons—to boost the sales of a new magazine, *L’Auto*. Its creators probably never imagined that they were also creating an event that would come to generate so much French pride and nationalist spirit. The Tour is, in effect, a huge French party. Each stage begins and ends in a different town, which is closed to traffic for the day. Everything stops for the Tour. It is a national and local celebration. French riders and their victories are cheered, with local riders feted and honoured.

These “giants of the road” do seem larger than life, as Roland Barthes’s well-known essay “The Tour de France as Epic” (1957) suggests. Barthes emphasizes “the great risk of the ordeal,” the “magnificent euphoria” that it makes possible, and the Tour’s function as “a myth of expression and a myth of projection, realistic and utopian at the same time.”\textsuperscript{23} The mythic aspect of the Tour, he argues, the tension between
its “vestiges of a very old ethic, feudal or tragic” and “the world of total competition,” obscures its commercial core:

It is in this ambiguity that the essential signification of the Tour consists: the masterly amalgam of the two alibis, idealist and realist, permits the legend to mask perfectly, with a veil at once honorable and exciting, the economic determinisms of our great epic. . . . What is vitiated in the Tour is the basis, the economic motives, the ultimate profit of the ordeal, generator of ideological alibis.24

Viewing riders as workers employed in the service of profit would undermine their status as heroes of an epic ordeal. Similarly, mythic heroes do not engage in doping. Their inspiration, their ability to transcend human limitations, derives from communion with the divine. “To dope the racer,” Barthes writes, “is as criminal, as sacrilegious as trying to imitate God; it is stealing from God the privilege of the spark.”25 This Barthean perspective does much to clarify the psychological foundation of public support for the Tour—the need to deny, or forgive, what threatens its utopian aspect.

**DOPING AND COMMUNITY SOLIDARITY**

As Barthes points out, riders are themselves caught in an ambiguous ethic, one in which “certain knightly imperatives constantly mingle with the brutal demands of the pure spirit of success.” A tension exists between the notion of an individual rider’s sacrifice and the “ethic of the collectivity” demanded by cycling as a team sport.26 There is indeed evidence that the riders love the sport and look out for each other. For example, when an accident occurs, the pack slows down and, if possible, allows the riders involved to catch up. At the same time, riders face pressures that work against group solidarity. Since the doping scandals, for example, some riders are concerned about guilt by association and seek to distance themselves from those implicated. In addition, riders face personal pressures. They often quit school at fifteen to become professionals, and, except for those who become superstars, they are not paid well: riders I interviewed in 2002 reported earning less than US$25,000 a year. They have families to feed, and they must often make hard choices to make ends meet. Members of cycling teams also endure a very long season, sometimes as long as ten months, most of which is spent away from home. This produces a team culture that is very tight and closed to the outside, and yet, even on the same team, riders have to compete with each other. This closed environment thus breeds a culture of secrecy around the tactics that each athlete uses to help him prepare.
Cycling is, in short, a very hard way of life, both physically and mentally, and its hardships certainly create bonds of sympathy and respect between some riders. But doping practices may also bind some of them together. Critics of cycling argue that the riding community has an endemic disdain for doping rules and claims a special status for itself as a subculture in which doping is quasi-tolerated. In this subculture, certain traditions are perpetuated. The pressure on the cyclists to dope has come in part from coaches and managers, who used drugs themselves during their cycling days when they were active athletes. The media then reinforce the image of cyclists as drug users. Positive tests for drugs confirm suspicions, the media then seize on these stories, and the publicity becomes confirmation that everyone is doping. Even those who choose to stay clean can’t escape being tainted. It’s not practically possible, nor is it financially possible to prove that one has taken a drug test every day and that it has always been negative. Athletes don’t trust the testing system, and they feel that their privacy is violated by constant testing. Some riders claim that doping is not even a voluntary decision. As one former professional put it, “No one starts out wanting to dope but you become a victim of the sport.”

This sort of solidarity is the product of a siege mentality, according to which telling the truth is incompatible with maintaining good team spirit. Riders are thus required to subordinate their self-interest to the law of silence rather than to an ideal in which the riders can take pride. In some ways, the solidarity of professional cyclists resembles that of a labour union. However, it was not until the spring of 1999, following the 1998 scandal, that the riders formed a professional cyclist association (known as the CPA, or Les cyclistes professionnels associés) and elected a president. Perhaps, until then, they did not view themselves as “workers” who were vulnerable to exploitation and needed to band together for mutual protection.

Anti-doping campaigns designed to address what is presented as a social plague that threatens public health find easy support from a general public that does not need drugs in order to make a living. But these campaigns overlook the situation of elite athletes. Official demands for drug-free sport put great pressure on sports associations to adopt strict anti-doping penalties that would in fact mean long periods of unemployment for riders who are caught using drugs. The UCI is concerned with the health of professional riders and has clearly articulated the economic interests and feelings of the athletes. Yet some at WADA have claimed that doping control by the UCI has been ineffective at best and, at worst, suspect. This is perhaps not surprising, given that the standard anti-doping doctrine more or less ignores the sociological and economic dimensions of the doping phenomenon.
Keeping Riders Safe from Drugs: A Contradiction

Adding to the tensions surrounding doping is the fact that professional cyclists are part of a community willing to engage in physically very dangerous behaviour—hurting down mountainsides at one hundred kilometres an hour, for example—in order to produce a cherished spectacle for the public. Yet, as Møller notes, “we still do not understand why these performers are willing to assume the role of the victim, even when it comes to ingesting drugs (such as amphetamines) that may damage health in the long term but are literally life-threatening when they are taken to prolong endurance.” The fact remains, however, that cyclists are drawn to, and the public fascinated by, extreme, risk-filled behaviour—and this produces a moral dilemma.

An obvious, almost absurd, contradiction exists between the public celebration of voluntary risk-taking on the part of elite athletes and doping-control regulations designed to protect their health. If we refuse to see riders as oppressed workers whose health and safety must be protected, then we must also reject the argument against doping in elite sport on the grounds that it is unhealthy. Given that the sport is in its very essence dangerous, it is difficult to argue the medical case—that professional cyclists need to be defended against bodily risks—to the public. In fact, the public appetite for extremes of performance has prompted some, including Møller, to defend the autonomy of the professional cycling subculture and the right of cyclists to practice self-medication without interference from outsiders. Perhaps this is one reason why, rather than concentrating on health maintenance that could withstand the scrutiny of outsiders, doctors and riders have entered into a tacit conspiracy.

Despite efforts at concealment, doping and cycling are intimately linked in the public imagination. Some point to the media coverage surrounding the Tour de France, which subjects riders to intense pressure and to a degree of scrutiny all but unparalleled in other sports. Spectators are well aware of that cyclists use drugs, as is evident from figure 17.1. The connection between doping and cycling has even been exploited as a marketing tactic. In 2002, the Swiss branch of the European Milk Board (a group about as mainstream as one could find) ran a billboard campaign featuring a cyclist milking a cow with the tag line: “Le lait. Doping naturel” (see figure 17.2). The underlying assumption here is that cyclists generally rely on drugs—coded in the ad as artificial and unwholesome—for the strength and endurance that allow them to test the very limits of human performance.
Figure 17.1  Spectators at the 2002 Tour de France took turns passing around an enormous syringe. This one is sporting a makeshift cape (à la Superman); another dressed up in a white lab coat. This playful mockery of the riders’ dependence on medical teams suggests that doping is widely acknowledged and accepted as an integral part of the spectacle. Photo courtesy of the author.

Figure 17.2  In 2002, the Swiss milk board seized on the association between cycling and drugs to promote its product as a healthful—and natural—alternative to doping. Photo courtesy of the author.
While participants in all elite sports push their bodies to the limits, in some sports, this is the entire point of the endeavour. In this respect, cycling is like weight-lifting: the point of both sports is to push the body to the limits of its strength. The effects of doping on strength and endurance are very direct, so the appeal of doping for cyclists is apparent. Insofar as doping is not natural—a form of cheating—it tarnishes the sport and creates a negative image for cycling. At the same time, long-distance stage racing is all about defying death, about pushing the human body to achieve the superhuman. The athletes who do this are heroes. Doping can thus be condoned by spectators and accepted by athletes as the price to be paid by those who wish to be great.

A doping culture that values performance above all, even at the cost of destroying the body, and that operates through peer pressure and secrecy would seem to be inherently unsustainable, yet it continues. Can the current physiological demands of the Tour de France be justified? Can the “special medical requirements” be defended, on principle, against outside criticism? The logical inconsistency regarding health leads many to question whether professional cycling essentially abandons medical concerns by virtue of what it does—leaving riders to fend for themselves. In France, at least, there appears to be no pressure for change.

THE TOUR DE FRANCE AS CARNIVAL

In Rabelais and His World, Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin describes medieval European popular culture as a culture of carnival, one that evolved out of ancient folk ritual. Whereas comic and festive ritual was once integrated into culture as a whole, the development, over time, of formal state and ecclesiastic structures, as well as the solidification of class divisions, had the effect of excluding this comic and festive element from the “official” culture, such that it became the alternative folk culture of carnival. In contrast to the culture of the church and feudal court, with its emphasis on pomp and circumstance, this alternative culture was one of feasts, fairs, pageants, clowns, fools, jugglers, profanity, trained animals, monsters, laughter, and parody, in which sacred rituals were mimicked and mocked by comic inversions. Carnival was, Bakhtin argues, a second world—a second life existing outside official life, a different way of living, a realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance:

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms,
and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. . . .

. . . All were considered equal during carnival. . . . A special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age. . . . People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought; they were experienced. The utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind.

This temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival a special type of communication impossible in everyday life.32

In the world of carnival, ordinary boundaries could be transgressed, and standard hierarchies were inverted. The world was turned upside down and inside out, a transposition that was celebrated in the medieval feast of fools, as well as in the choosing of the carnival King. During carnival, nothing was sacred, and no one was exempt. As Bakhtin argues, carnival “does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators”; it “is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people.”33 Carnival produced cultural forms characterized by their grotesque realism, the type of folk humour that degrades all that is high, spiritual, ideal, and abstract and that brings life back to the material, to the people and to the social body.34 Even though the laughter and excesses of carnival were clearly antithetical to the rationalism ushered in by the Enlightenment, the tradition has survived, especially in the annual festivities in the city of Nice.

Fundamental to the roots of Carnival was the worship of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, who was associated with madness, frenzy, and ritualized forms of ecstasy, as well as with the masking involved in theatre. As Elizabeth Vandiver observes, Dionysus, as “a god whose domains include possession, behavior inconsistent with one's normal character and acting out of things that one would not normally do, is an appropriate god for a theatrical tradition in which masked actors put on the face of another character before taking part in a drama.”35 Similarly, the Carnival in Nice offers a way to step outside of oneself, to assume personae and indulge alter egos, to lose oneself in the moment and revel in collective rapture.

The concept of “licensed transgression,” which is what carnival has always been about, can help to explain why many French people tacit accept doping in the Tour de France, a celebration that shares certain features with the tradition of carnival.
This association was illustrated in Nice Carnival 2012, which centred on the theme “King of Sport”: the parade included a float featuring a Tour de France cyclist trailed by his medical team (see figures 17.3 and 17.4). Like Carnival, with its parades, the Tour is a participatory event, a nationwide festivity that spills beyond French borders. Quite apart from the massive television audience, spectators crowd the streets, much as they might for the appearance of royalty, some of them standing so close to the race that they have been known to reach out to touch one of the riders.

**Figure 17.3** The theme of Nice Carnival 2012 was “King of Sport.” One of the floats in the parade featured a Tour de France cyclist preceded by a phalanx of syringes—the drugs on which these “Kings of the Road” rely. Perhaps not coincidentally, Carnival 2012 took place while Lance Armstrong was still under investigation by the US Anti-Doping Agency. Reproduced with permission of the photographer, Sara Lee.

The carnival is alternative, lying outside of and opposing officially sanctioned forms of behaviour. In the spirit of drunken revelling, doping is, in the context of carnival, no longer proscribed. Carnival is ambivalent: rather than imposing judgment, it embraces both the positive and the negative, celebrating this ambivalence by transforming the one into the other. This also describes the Tour de France, in particular the public’s ambivalence in France to the doping scandals.
Figure 17.4 Behind the lead cyclist—wearing his badge of honour, the yellow jersey—we see a gleeful Tour official (on the right) and the team doctor, looking more like a mad scientist than a healer. The float underscores the association between doping and the commercial success of the Tour: spectators expect a never-ending series of records broken. Reproduced with permission of the photographer, Sara Lee.

Carnival degrades the purity of the abstract and the ideal and celebrates the profane and the material. Similarly, one could argue that the commercial nature of the Tour degrades the ideals of competition: it is no longer “pure sport.” But, of course, the Tour was never anything but a commercial enterprise, and the use of performance-enhancing drugs (sugar cubes soaked in ether) played a part from the outset. At the same time, Carnival has a utopian aspect, liberating both imagination and experience from the orthodox and the conventional and revealing the possibility of transformation. The potential for transcendence is clearly expressed by the doped rider and his “Dr. Frankenstein” medical team—doctors inverted, transposed into mad scientists, with the body of the rider forever unfinished, never limited by its humanity but instead constantly transgressed and transfigured, as the object of an ongoing scientific experiment: the monster created.
CONCLUSION: THE QUESTION OF MORAL UNIVERSALS

It appears that, among the French, doping is generally condoned, at least in the case of Tour de France riders. In many other societies, however, it is not. This descriptive observation certainly seems to run counter to the idea of universal moral norms and thus to offer support for moral relativism, according to which the rules of morality can be entirely constructed by culture. In this view, those who judge one society by the norms of another make an error.

All the same, we must ask whether relativism is truly a satisfying answer to ethical conundrums. Moral relativism has a prescriptive, or normative, component. If no universal principles exist across cultures, if there are no grounds according to which we can judge one culture’s code of ethics to be better or worse than another’s, then we are also obliged to accept even personal actions that we find abhorrent, provided they are acceptable within the other person’s culture. After we have made an honest effort, in accordance with the principle of charity, to suspend judgment and attempt to render another person’s actions intelligible by situating them in their proper context, are there no moral absolutes by which we can then evaluate those actions? Many in France do not judge riders negatively when they dope for the sake of professional survival and because they are trying to win the Tour de France. Doping is perceived as necessary for the continuation of the event, which benefits French society as a whole, both economically and as a key source of national pride.

This perspective flows from the utilitarian principle—the “fundamental axiom,” as Jeremy Bentham described it—according to which morality is founded on the pursuit of whatever produces the greatest good for the greatest number. If such a fundamental principle exists, its existence clearly refutes the claim by the moral relativist that no universal moral principles exist. But, if we accept this principle, then we must extend it to the international sporting community. Most countries do not sanction drug use among athletes, and scandals surrounding the use of performance-enhancing drugs damage the reputation of the sporting community. One can argue, then, that bans on doping produce benefits for the greater international sporting community and that these benefits must override any one country’s assessment of the utility of doping.

To return to the Armstrong case, some Canadians may forgive him for doping to win the Tour de France on the grounds that every rider who has won the Tour has doped. That is, they may recognize that, within the culture of cycling, doping is ethically unproblematic. They may also have a personal sympathy for him because,
as a cancer survivor, he has cheated death. But these same people might also agree with the argument that for the greater good of international sports, doping should be banned. Furthermore, it is unlikely that very many Canadians (or Americans or citizens of most other countries) will be prepared to forgive Armstrong for the “collateral damage” he left in his wake—the people whom he “ran over,” as he called it, in his mission to keep the fraud alive so that he could continue racing and winning the Tour de France.

Although belief systems vary, and cultural relativists warn us about the danger of assuming that our preferences are based on some absolute standard, all societies, including the international sporting community, do recognize certain shared moral rules simply because those rules are necessary for society to exist. If Armstrong’s actions provoked no feelings of disapproval, this absence of ethical judgment would, as James Rachels suggests in his critique of relativism, call into doubt the very idea of moral progress.17

NOTES

1 Armstrong had been implicated in doping allegations since 1999, but it was only in 2012 that the US Anti-Doping Agency successfully compiled definitive evidence against him. In October 2012, he was formally stripped of his titles by the Union Cycliste Internationale, and, in January 2013, he finally confessed.

2 In other words, if a statement that purports to state a truth seems mistaken or incoherent to us, we should not assume that the speaker is in some way irrational; rather, we should assume that the speaker is attempting to articulate a meaning that most people would, in fact, recognize as true. See W. V. O. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960).

3 In “Three Varieties of Knowledge” (1991), Davidson distinguished two components of the principle of charity: the principle of coherence, which “prompts the interpreter to discover a degree of logical consistency in the thought of the speaker,” and the principle of correspondence, which “prompts the interpreter to take the speaker to be responding to the same features of the world that he (the interpreter) would be responding to under similar circumstances.” As he noted, “one principle endows the speaker with a modicum of logic, the other endows him with a degree of what the interpreter takes to be true belief about the world.” Donald Davidson, “Three Varieties of Knowledge” (1991), in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 211. See also the essays in the section on radical interpretation, as well as Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).
6 This position, often referred to as cultural relativism, was described by Ruth Benedict in “Anthropology and the Abnormal,” *Journal of General Psychology* 10, no. 1 (1934): 59–82. “Morality differs in every society,” Benedict wrote, “and is a convenient term for socially approved habits” (73).
7 Union Cycliste Internationale, *The Essence of Road Cycling* (Aigle, Switzerland: UCI, 2001). I quote from the English version prepared by the UCI.
11 I am drawing here on discussions that took place during meetings I attended as director of Ethics and Education for the World Anti-Doping Agency.
12 As Singler and Treutlein observe, “One of the remarkable aspects of the physicians’ self-image is their constant boasting about their moderating influence, at the same time that they claim to be helpless when confronted with the prevailing [social] conditions.” *Doping—von der Analyse zur Prävention* (Aachen: Meyer and Meyer Verlag, 2001), 40–41; the translation was provided by John Hoberman.
14 Schneider, “Cultural Nuances,” 38.
18 Verner Møller, *Dopingdjævlen—analyse af en hed debat* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1999), 88–89.
19 Quoted in Schneider, “Cultural Nuances,” 39.
22 Schneider, “Cultural Nuances,” 41.
24 Ibid., 86, 87–88.
25 Ibid., 83. Also with reference to the divine, Verner Møller offers precisely the opposite interpretation: “In our culture the use of doping has fallen under a taboo. By violating this taboo within certain limits, the athletes open a portal to that which is ‘sacred.’ It is in doping that one finds a worthy analogy to the myth of the titan Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods and gave it to men, thereby reducing the distance between the human and the divine.” The Doping Devil, 108.
26 Barthes, “Tour de France as Epic,” 85.
30 Hoberman, “Pharmacy on Wheels.”
32 Ibid., 10.
33 Ibid., 7.
34 Ibid., 24–25.