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# **The Confession Dilemma: Doping, Lying, and Narrative Identity**

Despite the commonly held view that confessing to doping is morally right, few former elite athletes who have doped confess to doping. In this paper, I ask whether elite athletes who have doped are morally obliged to confess. I start by observing that the core of the elite athlete's confession dilemma is located in the dichotomy between lying and veracity. I argue that lying about doping belongs to a particular kind of lying that, in turn, brings about a particular kind of consequence. More specifically, I consider lying about doping in light of an athlete's personal narrative identity. Initially, the narrative identity view seems to strongly support an elite athlete's moral obligation to confess (i.e. to start telling the truth about who they really are). However, viewing narrative identity not merely as description (responding to the question, Who am I?) but also prescription (responding to the question, Who should I be?) complicates this picture. The prescriptive perspective of narrative identity is a gateway to understanding the significant negative consequences of confessing to doping. In this way, I call into question commonly held views about the moral obligation to confess.

Keywords: Doping; cycling; narrative identity; confession; lying.

## **Introduction**

There's no easy way to say this, so let me just say it plain: on Sunday night you'll see me on 60 Minutes making a confession that's overdue. Long overdue. During my cycling career, I knowingly broke the rules. I used performance-enhancing drugs. I lied about it, over and over. Worst of all, I hurt people I care about. And while there are reasons for what I did—reasons I hope you'll understand better after watching—it doesn't excuse the fact that I did it all, and there's no way on earth to undo it. (Tyler Hamilton's letter of confession 2011).

For close to 15 years I've kept a secret. I will start at the beginning, but first I will say that what's been revealed the last two weeks through the USADA [United States Anti-Doping Agency]'s report on US Postal has made it necessary for me to pull out my dark lie from the past. [...] After my first two years as professional, a bit into the 1998 season, I made the choice that if I was to continue in this "race", I

had to take part in the prerequisites that I felt existed in the peloton,<sup>1</sup> and I got, on my own initiative, EPO [erythropoietin].

(Press conference with Steffen Kjærgaard 2012, author's translation)

These are the first words of two professional road cyclists' public confessions to doping. Tyler Hamilton and Steffen Kjærgaard are not alone. In the context of several 'scandals' in road cycling, beginning with the 1998 Festina affair<sup>2</sup> and culminating with the demise of Lance Armstrong<sup>3</sup>, numerous athletes—in autobiographies, press statements, interviews, or testimonies to civil law enforcement agencies or sports' anti-doping authorities—have confessed to doping; that is, to using erythropoietin (EPO), human growth hormone, blood transfusions, or other banned technologies to increase athletic performance.

With tales of regret, hurt loved ones, deception, and self-deception, the quotations attest to the morally charged nature of doping use in elite sports and, relatedly, the morally charged nature of confessing to doping. The stance that confessing to doping is morally right is a recurring theme in the autobiographies of

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<sup>1</sup> In road cycling, 'peloton' is a term used (1) during races to refer to the main group of riders or (2) outside races to refer to riders at a certain sporting level as a whole, for example "the professional peloton".

<sup>2</sup> The Festina affair was a series of doping revelations and conflicts that occurred during and after the 1998 Tour de France, commencing with French Customs' discovery of various doping products in an official team car of the leading French cycling team, Festina (Brissonneau 2015; Voet 2002).

<sup>3</sup> In October 2012, the United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) submitted to the Union Cycliste International (UCI) and the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) a 'Reasoned Decision' in the agency's case against Lance Armstrong. The Reasoned Decision contained evidence proving beyond doubt the use, possession, and distribution of doping substances by Armstrong and the existence of a large-scale doping program in Armstrong's US Postal Service Pro Cycling Team (United States Anti-Doping Agency 2012).

several road cyclists: finally, after years of wrongdoing, the message is that they have done the right thing. As Thomas Dekker, who tested positive for EPO in 2009, puts it: “It’s only in recent years that I’ve been able to see my actions for what they were, take stock of the damage I’ve done. I have made a mess of things. The aim of this book is to clear up part of that mess” (Dekker and Zonneveld 2017, 210).

Moreover, the framing of confessing as morally right was salient in the USADA’s public communication about its case against Lance Armstrong and the US Postal Service Pro Cycling Team. The case was built on testimonies from several of Armstrong’s former teammates (including Hamilton), and USADA CEO Travis Tygart publicly described the testifying athletes as “heroes” who displayed “tremendous courage” (Brown 2014; Tygart 2012). According to anti-doping authorities, athletes’ confessions greatly contribute to the identification of other cheaters and influence anti-doping education by increasing educators’ understanding of doping practices (e.g. Niggli 2017).

Despite clear recommendations from confessing athletes and anti-doping authorities that admitting to doping is morally right, few elite athletes who dope seem to confess. An independent investigation into road cycling’s history of doping specified that “from the early 1990s to the mid/late-2000s”—a period often referred to as the ‘blood doping era’—“it would have been hard to overestimate the prevalence of drug use in the peloton” (Marty et al. 2015). While there has not been a scientific study about the prevalence of doping in professional road cycling, *not* doping seems to have been the exception rather than the rule in this particular ‘era’<sup>4</sup>. This assumption is consistent

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<sup>4</sup> The term 'blood doping era' refers a period lasting from roughly the early 1990s to the late 2000s. In this period, blood doping technologies such as EPO and blood transfusions were supposedly particularly prevalent in professional road cycling (Marty et al. 2015).

with the general impression from athletes' testimonies, media reports, and the stance of anti-doping authorities. Given these circumstances, the number of confessing athletes is relatively low. The same is true for other sports: in athletics, for example, a recent study estimated the prevalence of doping among the participants in two international championships held in 2011 to be 43.6 percent and 57.1 percent, respectively (Ulrich et al. 2018). Comparatively, the number of doping confessions in athletics is negligible.

In this paper, I ask whether elite athletes who have doped are morally obliged to confess. My discussion focuses on the dilemma of professional road cyclists who doped during the blood doping era of the early 1990s to the late 2000s. Tyler Hamilton and Steffen Kjærgaard are examples of such cyclists. I want to stress that my analysis does not concern their individual cases—or any individual case—*per se*. Instead, I draw upon various reports (including social research), autobiographies, and journalistic interviews to substantiate a philosophical argument about the morality of doping confessions.

In the following section, I argue that the core of the confession dilemma lies in the dichotomy between lying and veracity, and I develop an approach to the ethics of lying indebted to the work of Bok (1999). Lying comes in many forms, and in the subsequent section I depart from a recent argument framing elite athletes' lies about doping as lies about who they really are in the eyes of the public (Gendreau 2015). More specifically, I consider lying about doping in light of athletes' personal narrative identity. While the narrative identity view seems to strongly support an elite athlete's moral obligation to confess, I argue that viewing narrative identity not merely as description but also as prescription complicates this picture. The prescriptive perspective of narrative identity is a gateway to understanding the significant negative consequences of confessing to doping, which calls into question commonly held views on the moral obligation to confess.

## **The ethics of lying**

Deception is a necessary part of successfully doping in most sports. From a virtue ethical standpoint, McNamee (2008) highlighted the role systematic deception plays in the moral evaluation of “doping cheats” as constitutive of the vices, *pleonexia* and *aidos*. Similarly, Gendreau (2015) identified lying as the central moral concept feeding into the public condemnation typically facing elite athletes who dope. The quotations in the introduction illustrate how lying is a central aspect of elite athletes’ experience of doping or, as in these particular cases, former elite athletes’ experiences of *having* doped. In essence, to confess or not is a question of whether to continue lying about one’s history of doping or start telling the truth.

In the seminal book *Lying* (1999), Bok departs from the consequentialist approach by arguing that weighing good and bad consequences has an important intuitive quality and approximates a commonsensical approach to lying. Arguments commonly acknowledged as justifying a lie typically stress how the lie promotes some good consequence or protects from some bad consequence. According to a clear-cut consequentialist view, lying is morally neutral. Thus, if telling a lie produces better consequences than telling the truth, then lying is right and truth-telling is wrong. If telling the truth or a lie produce equally good and bad consequences, then telling the truth or a lie are morally equivalent. The consequentialist position leads to intuitively problematic conclusions, including that it is right to tell—and wrong not to tell—a lie that produces only marginally good consequences to oneself and no good or bad consequence to anyone else. Facing such conflicts with intuition, Bok argues that lying ought not to be considered morally neutral and need not be treated as such, even from a consequentialist perspective.

Moreover, a clear-cut consequentialist approach risks biased calculations that undermine distant negative consequences of lying (affecting distant others and/or in the distant future) in favour of salient positive consequences (affecting ourselves or significant others in the present). For these reasons, Bok stresses that a consequentialist approach must account for the moral status of lying and restrain our tendency to prefer near over distant consequences. Hence, she argues that a moral analysis should begin from an initial presumption against lying, “as a correction, endorsed by experience” (Bok 1999, 50). As such, she endorses a conditional principle of veracity, which holds that lying comes with a negative presumption and is wrong, barring overriding ethical reasons to lie. That is, reasons to lie must carry more weight—even substantially so—than reasons to tell the truth. Here, then, Bok returns to consequentialism as the approach with which to examine any potentially overriding reasons for lying.

Bok argues that the consequences of lying should be looked at from three viewpoints. First, lying can both benefit and harm the liar him or herself, and the consequences to the person contemplating the lie affect the consequentialist analysis. Second, the purpose of a lie is often closely aligned with some intended good or bad consequence to the deceived, and these consequences should be accounted for. Third, we should evaluate lies from the viewpoint of aggregation: if the kind of lying considered in a particular case spreads and gives rise to a deceptive practice, what consequences would that produce to society?

My intention in this paper is not to map and calculate all the possible consequences arising from whether an elite athlete confesses to doping or not. Rather, I aim to show how lying about having doped belongs to a particular kind of lying which, in turn, gives rise to particular kinds of consequences that operate across the three viewpoints proposed by Bok. This particularity, I argue, encompasses lies that

substantially affect how the liar reflects on the question, Who am I? In a narrative approach to personal identity, lying about core actions or experiences in our lives equates to lying about core aspects of who we are.

### **Narrative identity as description and cyclists with a history of doping**

The following argument rests on the premise that (1) being a former professional road cyclist and (2) having doped are likely to be core aspects of how a person answers the question, Who am I?—or, as I conceptualise it here, of a person's narrative identity. To Ricoeur (1988b; 1992), narrative identity starts from the observation that human experience is narratively structured in the sense that objective/cosmological time and phenomenological time are reconfigured and rearticulated in our experience through narrative means. Through stories and plots, we make sense of our experience and, by extension, ourselves as the protagonists of that experience. As such, narrativity contributes to the constitution not only of what Ricoeur calls human time but also of the self.

In more practical terms, narrative identity can be conceptualised as an evolving and dynamic life narrative which functions to integrate the (roughly) recollected past and the (uncertain) anticipated future in order to ingrain one's life in the present with a sense of meaning, value, and purpose (Atkins 2008; Scechtman 1996). Narrative identity is evolving as we lead our lives and dynamic as we continuously tell and re-tell our self-narratives through experience and reflection and, thus, edit and re-edit our identities. Because we lead lives in social and historical settings, narrative identity cannot merely be a first-person report of one's subjective experiences and point of view. Our social existence dictates that the first-person perspective (in which I am the 'me' in my life) be inevitably interweaved with the second-person perspective (in which I am a 'you' in your life). With the title of his major work on narrative identity, *Oneself as*



*Another*, Ricoeur (1992, 3) highlights the centrality of the sense of otherness implied in the narrative constitution of the self:

Oneself as Another suggests from the outset that the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, that instead one passes into the other, as we might say in Hegelian terms. To “as” I should like to attach a strong meaning, not only that of comparison (oneself similar to another) but indeed that of implication (oneself inasmuch as being other).

This dialectic of selfhood creates a minimum requirement of coherency of a specific kind. A clear sense of who one is depends on a self-narrative that coordinates the two perspectives, meaning that the ‘me’ in my life is coherent with the ‘you’ in your life. Coherency of this kind is determined by how *I* view *myself* across both perspectives, and the second-person perspective is mediated to some degree by my experience of how other persons actually view me (as a ‘you’ in their lives).

Is it reasonable, within this framework, to claim that (1) being a former professional road cyclist and (2) having doped are likely to be core aspects of a person’s narrative identity? The question of how central an action or experience is to our identity is complex and subject to narrative’s dynamic nature. One salient aspect is the role of social and historical circumstances and collectively shared themes. In the current Western context, for example, education and occupation are core themes at a collective level and, correspondingly, core themes in many (or most) people’s life narratives. Similarly, elite sports strongly delineate individual lives through their time-consuming narratives of training, preparation, and competition as well as the popularised, appraised, and even heroised ‘status’ of elite athletes. Furthermore, elite sports offer several strong ‘identity markers’ that work across the dialectic between self and other. One example concerns the bodily aspect of sports and the moulding of bodies recognisable to oneself and others as ‘athlete bodies’. A different example is the staging

of dramatic performances before an audience, and the imprint of these into a ‘collective sports memory’, meaning that a sports performance is both something to remember and something to be remembered by.

Social and historical circumstances seem to play a crucial role in doping. If doping is—as in many Western countries today—highly publicised, problematised, and even criminalised, it is more likely to be a central theme in the doped athlete’s life narrative than if it was a mundane and trivial phenomenon. As Gendreau (2015) points out, the relationship between doping and narrative identity is crucially a matter of the role ‘not doping’ plays in most elite athletes’ public narrative. In strong anti-doping cultures, that elite athletes do not dope is something a majority of people (explicitly or implicitly) hold as a precondition for admiring, celebrating, or even taking an interest in their endeavors (e.g. Engelberg et al. 2012; Solberg et al. 2010). Correspondingly, elite athletes often share with the public an active stance against doping and, by doing so, put the label ‘clean athlete’ on their public narratives (Gendreau 2015). Athletes who dope break with this narrative. Arguably, the awareness of breaking with public expectations and doing something most people consider wrong is likely to turn doping into a controversial aspect of one’s life story.

Thus, it makes sense to say that former professional road cyclists who have doped and lie about it lie about core aspects of who they really are. Looking at this particular kind of lying from the three viewpoints proposed by Bok initially seems to highlight its problematic nature. Considering first the liar’s viewpoint, lying about core aspects of who one really is potentially comes close to the meaning of the expression ‘living a lie’: always aware of the notion that how one is made sense of by (some, many, or most) others differs in core aspects from how one, in the first-person perspective, makes sense of oneself. Whereas one’s first-person perspective re-articulates subjective

experiences more or less accurately, the second-person perspective must integrate a ‘deceptive layer’ that accounts for the lies told and the deception undertaken. For extreme cases, such as unqualified medical doctors or even non-confessing serial killers, this deception is not only a threat to the psychological need to be made sense of by others, but also a challenge to a clear sense of who one is, potentially threatening the narrative identity itself. While a former cyclist’s lies about doping hardly compare to these extreme cases, the need for a deceptive layer in the second-person perspective of narrative is present, and similar consequences are conceivable.

Turning to the perspective of the deceived, it is difficult to think of examples of lies about core aspects of who one really is that are designed to benefit the deceived. There might be candidates; for instance, war veterans who do not mention to spouses that they have killed people during a war or parents who never tell their children that their divorce was due to infidelity. These are only candidates for consideration, however, with no obvious conclusions. In most instances where people lie about core actions and events in their life story, they do so mainly to achieve some personal benefit or avoid harm to themselves. This is not to say that the deceived are necessarily harmed; it only goes to show that they are less likely to be the primary ones to benefit from the lie.

This assumption seems to hold true in the case of former cyclists lying about doping. Presumably, these lies deceive a variety of people—from significant others, former teammates and competitors, and various subgroups of road cycling fans and sports fans to the general public. Thus, the potential consequences are diverse. However, it is difficult to think of primary beneficiaries of doping lies across these groups of deceived. Secondary beneficiaries seem much more conceivable. Examples can be family members, who savour the economic benefits that follow from a

successful, perceivably ‘clean’ career, former teammates, who avoid the harm of being rendered suspect, or those fans whose enjoyment of the sport or the specific athlete decreases with the exposure of doping.

Finally, what would the consequences be if lies about who we are became an established practice? On a general level, at least some degree of veracity about who one is seems core to the basic trust necessary for meaningful human interaction and community. A society full of doctors practising without degrees in medicine is not just difficult to imagine but deeply problematic for reasons relating to communication and trust. Indeed, if not comparable to such extreme cases, the practices of doping in elite sports provide an interesting example of how lies about who we are can challenge meaningful interaction. In sports where the prevalence of doping is high, communication about performances in general and ‘record performances’ in particular seem increasingly complicated by uncertainty surrounding the question of whether record holders doped or not. In highly standardised sports with exact performance measurements, where the record narrative is a considerable part of the sport’s attraction, uncertainty about the legitimacy of records is a significant challenge (Loland 2006)<sup>5</sup>.

### **Narrative identity as prescription, and cyclists with a history of doping**

The narrative identity view clearly seems to support the argument that former professional road cyclists who have doped have a moral obligation to confess. This conclusion, however, would be premature. The above analysis concerns lying about who one is in descriptive terms. By lying about doping, cyclists offer an inaccurate

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<sup>5</sup> Recently, uncertainty about the legitimacy of records led to a proposal from European Athletics to erase all world and European records in athletics set before 2005, due to the relative lack of doping tests at the time.

description of who they are in the sense of what they have experienced and done. However, narrative identity is not only about description but also about prescription. It involves value judgments of the description—a scrutinising aspect of, Who should I be? besides the descriptive, Who am I? As Ricoeur (1992, 114) puts it, “Narrative theory finds one of its major justifications in the role it plays as a middle ground between the descriptive viewpoint on action [...] and the prescriptive viewpoint”.

Applying the prescriptive viewpoint adds to the requirement of coherency. A clear sense of who one is depends not only on some degree of coherence about core actions and events but also on some degree of coherence about the moral evaluation of those actions and events. To Ricoeur (1988a, 99), human life has an ethical aim, and that aim is self-esteem: “the interpretation of ourselves mediated by the ethical evaluation of our actions”. Conflicting moral evaluations of one’s actions disturb this self-interpretation and call into question one’s ability to pursue life with *ethical intention*: “aiming at the ‘good life’ with and for others in just institutions” (Ricoeur 1992, 172).

On this background, I argue that in the case of the former professional road cyclist who has doped, a full confession secures the former kind of coherence but is no guarantee of the latter. Rather, confessing cyclists are likely to face the challenge of being made sense of by others as moral agents, potentially presenting a radical challenge to self-esteem.

This challenge seems particularly salient for people who travel between cultural contexts with different social norms and moral frameworks. The clearest examples probably stem from the war context and involve soldiers who come from cultures with deeply held moral beliefs that are likely to be transgressed during a war. Returning home, the challenge of justifying the actions of war to oneself and others can be

overwhelming. While an outright comparison seems misplaced, there are some parallels to the context of professional road cycling in the blood doping era.

Cyclists' autobiographies from this era typically describe travelling from strong anti-doping cultures, or at least cultures that value 'fair play' in sports, to what Waddington (2000) terms professional road cycling's 'internal culture of tolerance' to doping. This 'travel' between social contexts is not only in the abstract. For many riders, turning professional means moving to a new country. With 70–100 race days over a 9–10 month season and several 1–3 week training camps in far-off locations, it becomes habit that the people you see for breakfast, work, dinner, and even those with whom you share flats at home and rooms during races or camps, are colleagues: fellow riders and support personnel. This fact also makes road cycling a closed culture, susceptible to the development of distinctive social norms and moral frameworks. On returning from Europe to the United States in the off-season for a brief holiday, Tyler Hamilton described the notion of living "on two planets at once":

One afternoon, my father came to me with that question. He sat me down; he brought up Festina. My dad's a smart guy; he knew that Festina wasn't something that could be brushed away. He was clear: he didn't want me getting mixed up in a bad scene, in something I might regret later.

I didn't hesitate.

"Dad, if I ever have to take that stuff to compete, I'll retire."

[...]

When I spoke those words to my father, it sealed my life in bike racing behind a steel door. That was the moment I started learning what we all had to learn: how to live on two planets at once.

(Hamilton and Coyle 2012, 76)

To Hamilton, it seems, living on two planets at once meant travelling between cultural contexts in which doping in sports was evaluated very differently. Reflecting on

this notion, I will consider three ways in which the doping cyclist's narrative is likely to be evaluated differently within different cultural contexts.

*(i) The autonomy of choosing to dope*

I'm a chameleon. I adapt to my surroundings. If they're black, I'm black. If they're bright blue, you can count on me to be the biggest Smurf of the lot.

(Dekker and Zonneveld 2017, 169)

Waddington's (2000, 63) case study of the 1998 Tour de France describes the shared understanding among riders and support personnel—"even those who may have strong objections to the use of drugs"—of good reasons to dope in the particular context in which they found themselves. One reason was the sport's economic structure. Most riders were on short-term contracts, and most teams were financed by short-term sponsorship. Riders, teams, and sponsors depended on participation in big races like the Tour de France but had no assurances of such. The result, as Hamilton and Coyle (2012, 35) put it, was "a chain of perpetual nervousness: Sponsors are nervous because they need results. Team directors are nervous because they need results. And riders are nervous because they need results to get a contract".

A second aspect was the physical and psychological demands of the sport. Road cycling is a tough endurance sport. Races last for hours, stage races last for weeks, and race organisers commonly seek out tough terrain—steep hills, high mountains, or rough cobbled roads—to separate the wheat from the chaff and facilitate spectacle.

Furthermore, the logic of the road race—the most common form of competition—typically deprives individual riders of the possibility of setting their own pace. Rather, various interests in the peloton determine the pace, and it is up to each rider to follow, reducing or indeed removing the notion of control over physical effort and arguably adding a certain sense of despair to the experience of not being competitive.

The economic structure and physical and psychological demands of the sport seem to have contributed to a perceived need for illegal substances and methods to perform, recover, and cope. The third, and crucial, reason, however, was the fact that *others* doped. In a competitive environment where one's performances are only relative to the performances of others, there is a coercive effect in which one rider's decision to dope creates added incentives for other riders to dope (Murray 1983)<sup>6</sup>. As such, the perceived necessity of doping is contextually dependent upon the doping of others. It is not the distances covered during races or the contract situation *per se* that create a sense of necessity, but the knowledge or the sense that competitors covered those distances and fought for contracts with the aid of doping. The testimony of George Hincapie, a longstanding teammate of Lance Armstrong, reads:

In 1995, there appeared to me to be a major change in the peloton. It was becoming very difficult to keep up, and I learned that the reason was the widespread use of erythropoietin [...]. As the speed of the peloton increased, we seemed to be confronted with the choice of using EPO or not performing well in races.  
(Affidavit of George Hincapie 2012)

Research by Ohl et al. (2015, 879) suggest that permissive attitudes towards doping were so entrenched in the 'social dramas' of professional road cycling teams that "reasoning on an individual level [wa]s not very relevant" to individual athletes' decision to dope.

As such, cyclists with a history of doping may wish to project a narrative that highlights the social and cultural context of professional road cycling, accounting for their decision to dope through narratives of socialisation and social pressures. In the

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<sup>6</sup> Game theoretical approaches to doping in sports highlight this coercive effect (Breivik 1992; Haugen et al. 2013).



end, if this is how they re-articulate their experiences and make sense of themselves, this is how they would want to be made sense of by others. The problem with such a projection is that it is likely to contrast with what seems to be a widespread understanding, particularly in strong anti-doping cultures, of doping as an autonomous decision avoided by those with a finely tuned moral compass (Møller 2010; Sandvik et al. 2017). There are good reasons why this latter understanding dominates. The main reason, perhaps, is institutional, having to do with anti-doping organisations' vast efforts to detect, deter, and punish doping among individual athletes, while often overlooking the role of support personnel or, more generally, the social systems in which doping takes place. While anti-doping organisations seem increasingly aware of the importance of the social context of doping, the notion left to the public from a judicial system that raises and tests the cases of individual athletes seems tied to the fact that, in the end, individuals dope and individuals are caught doping. At the same time, most media coverage of doping cases focuses primarily on the individual; a fact probably related to the institutional and judicial system but also to a more general focus on the individual elite athlete in the media coverage of sport in general (e.g. Sefiha 2010).

***(ii) The meaningfulness of doping***

A second way in which the narrative of a former professional road cyclist who doped is likely to be evaluated differently within different cultural contexts concerns the meaning of doping. Brännmark (2001, 2006) argues that to understand the meaning of life events, we must take into consideration how the events fit into the narrative of the life in question. Another way to put this is that the meaning of life events is intrinsically tied up with narrative identity: what some event or action means to me depends on who I am. Brännmark (2006) distinguishes between two types of narrative meaning:

purposive and contrastive. Purposive meaning describes the way in which actions and events form parts of meaningful pursuits. The basic assumption is that it is prudentially better to succeed in a meaningful pursuit than to succeed in a meaningless one and that it might be better to fail in a meaningful pursuit than to succeed in a meaningless one.

The assertion that elite athletes believe that elite sport is a meaningful pursuit is uncontroverted. This assertion is no less true for road cyclists. Christiansen's (2005) cultural analysis of elite road cycling in Denmark in the 1990s and early 2000s offers a rich description of the purposive meaning of road cycling. Christiansen describes road cycling's attraction to its participants as paradoxical: young riders invest huge amounts of time and energy in the sport and sacrifice education and more conventional social lives, all the while knowing that only a select few will be able to pursue road cycling as a career. What drives them? The answer, according to Christiansen, has to do with Maslow's term 'self-actualisation'—the growth process towards the fulfilment of 'the highest needs', in particular, the need for meaning in life. For elite athletes, the sense of pursuing something 'higher' and more meaningful than, for instance, economic rewards, fame, or appreciation, typically comes with cultivating talent—setting, pursuing, and fulfilling goals based on athletic development. Self-actualisation is inherent in the pursuit of 'becoming a better athlete', and, for Christiansen's informants, this process is reinforced by so-called peak experiences on the bike.

If we accept the idea that professional road cycling is a meaningful pursuit, the next step is to consider the idea that doping is a (perceivably) necessary part of that pursuit. If something is perceived as necessary to the fulfilment of a meaningful pursuit, it seems that this something derives its own kind of purposive meaning from that fact. In the previous section, I described the perception of doping as necessary among professional road cyclists in the blood doping era. The way in which doping might

derive purposive meaning from being part of the larger, meaningful pursuit of road cycling is neatly captured in this quote from one of Christiansen's (2005, 273-74, author's translation) informants, described as a dedicated athlete "bitten by the sport":

I have wanted to be a professional bike rider since I was a little boy, and now I have the chance. If the consequence is that I have to take medicine, that will not get me to stop pursuing the dream. I have not been riding a bicycle for so many years just to quit now when I have come so far that I am living out the dream.

Being a professional road cyclist is so important to the informant that the prospect of having to take drugs in order to continue is almost trivial in comparison. To him, quitting because of having to "take medicine", is irrational. Due to the importance—the meaningfulness—of cycling, continuing rather than quitting is a given, and doping is, more or less irrelevantly, a necessary means to that end.

Doping does not merely derive purposive meaning by being a (perceivably) necessary means to an end, however. Understanding the meaningfulness of elite athleticism as being closely aligned with the notion of 'becoming a better athlete', the performance-enhancing effect of doping, arguably, gives it a sort of contrastive meaning as well. Contrastive meaning, according to Brännmark (2006), refers to the kind of meaning actions or events derive from being situated among other narratively ordered action or events. The same action performed by two persons (e.g. the injection of EPO) may bring about virtually identical experiential qualities such as discomfort or pain. Their respective meaning will nevertheless diverge depending on the narrative of the life in question. Consider, for instance, a patient suffering from anaemia injecting EPO compared to a professional cyclist seeking performance-enhancement. For the patient, the injection may form a traumatic part of a troubling narrative of illness, for the professional cyclist, however, it may fit into an almost all-encompassing pattern of

supposedly performance-enhancing behaviour that resonates with a range of measures taken to become a better athlete.

To former cyclists, therefore, it might well make sense to say that doping formed a meaningful aspect of their life narrative. At the very least, it makes sense to say that doping was not detrimental to the meaningfulness of being a cyclist. Again, it seems reasonable to suggest that this view contrasts with the dominant positions in strong anti-doping cultures. While there is, to my knowledge, no research on public perceptions about the meaning of doping or doped performances, the notion that doping deprives athletic endeavours of worth and meaning seems widespread.

### *(iii) Notions of loyalty involved in doping*

In mainstream anti-doping culture, doping is often understood as an act of disloyalty towards the athletic community—a sort of betrayal of colleagues, competitors, spectators, and stakeholders (Miah 2010). Because doping is banned and generally viewed as morally problematic and, crucially, because there are athletes who *do not* dope, athletes who *do* dope seek an unfair advantage and disrupt the cooperative and rule-adhering basics of sport. However, the former cyclist's narrative may revolve around different conceptions of loyalty. To understand this aspect, it is crucial to understand the logic of road cycling as an individual sport with a hierarchical team structure. Whereas in conventional team sports, teams win or lose as units, road cycling is organised as a team sport but awards individual winners and losers. The tactical function of teams is to offer support for designated team leaders, such as having team helpers protect team leaders from the wind, reel in breakaways, or set a fierce pace to tire competitors. 'Sacrifice' is an apt term describing the duties of a team helper and, in many ways, the duty of sacrifice extends beyond the races.

For a team helper in the blood doping era, loyalty to the team and, crucially, the team leader, could mean doping. There are a few examples in the testimonies and biographical accounts of explicit expectations to dope in order to offer the best assistance possible. For instance, George Hincapie recalls:

Around this time, we got crushed in the Milan-San Remo race and coming home from the race Lance Armstrong was very upset. As we drove home Lance said, in substance, that “this is bullshit, people are using stuff” and “we are getting killed”. He said, in substance, that he did not want to get crushed anymore and something needed to be done. I understood that he meant the team needed to get on EPO. (Affidavit of George Hincapie 2012)

Moreover, implicit expectations are apparent in several accounts. Below, Tyler Hamilton recalls being introduced to blood transfusions:

The last night of the Dauphiné [race], Lance [Armstrong] and Johan [Bruyneel; Sports Director] came to my hotel room. I expected them to talk about the race or maybe plan for the upcoming Tour [de France]. Instead, they told me that on Tuesday, two days after the race ended, we were going to fly to Valencia to do a blood transfusion. [...] As Johan explained it, Lance, Kevin [Livingstone; teammate], and I would fly to Valencia. We would donate a bag of blood, which would be stored, and we’d fly home the next day. Then, at a key point during the Tour, we’d put the bag back in, and we’d get a boost. [...] I listened to Johan, nodded, gave him my poker face. [...] But part of me was thinking, What the hell? (Hamilton and Coyle 2012, 119-121)

Hamilton and Livingstone were key helpers to Armstrong, particularly in the crucial mountain stages where being ‘isolated’—short of teammates—too early in the stage can be detrimental to a team leader’s performance. For Armstrong to win, Hamilton and Livingstone had to perform. There is self-interest involved in ensuring a good performance for one’s team leader. Nevertheless, Hamilton’s decision not to speak

up but quietly acquiesce to the transfusions can also easily be framed as a form of loyalty.

Thus, doping can be a sign of loyalty to one's employer and team leader. Furthermore, as doping is a social practice and one's confession is likely to implicate others, lying about doping can be an act of loyalty as well, ultimately shaping the confession dilemma into a question of honesty or loyalty. Thus, the self-narrative of the confessing cyclist may involve a double-edged conflict of, on the one hand, the moral status of doping, and, on the other hand, the moral status of the confession itself.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of the previous section was not to juxtapose conflicting views about doping to offer a form of moral evaluation. Rather, highlighting conflicting views on notions of autonomy, meaningfulness, and loyalty involved in doping practices shows how, in confessing to doping, former professional road cyclists risk presenting themselves to others as morally inferior to the person they see themselves as. Always viewing oneself also as another, this moral conflict leads to incoherence between the first and second person perspectives of narrative, regarding one's ways of navigating sports' landscape of moral choice.

What are the consequences across the three viewpoints proposed by Bok? To the cyclist, confessing to doping with all likelihood results in conflicting moral evaluations of his actions, potentially presenting a radical challenge to his sense of ability to pursue an ethical life. Probably, some cyclists can escape this harm by effectively disapproving conflicting evaluations of their actions. However, in strong anti-doping cultures where anti-doping norms appear pervasive and uncontested in public discourse, disapproving conflicting evaluations all together seems improbable. Always viewing oneself also as another, pervasive negative evaluations from others matter, even in cases where one

doubts their merit.

Confronted with these conflicting evaluations, similar harms to the cyclist's significant others seem likely. Illustratively, Steffen Kjærgaard recalls the morning following his confession:

I experienced the day after as a doomsday movie in which the protagonist wakes up after the rolling titles, and everything seems normal. The sun shines, and the grass is green. Birds sing. Kids play in the street. I ride over to the grocery store.

Bang. Three of four newspapers had my confession [on the] front cover. The front page of [national newspaper] VG featured an old photo of me and my wife. The splash headline astounded him. "SHE KNEW EVERYTHING".

(Kjærgaard 2012, author's translation)

A reasonable interpretation of the VG headline—apparently shared by Kjærgaard—is that it implies that a spouse's knowledge about an athlete's doping is morally problematic<sup>7</sup>. Thus, being framed explicitly or implicitly as complicit seems one way in which significant others may experience harms similar to the harms to cyclists themselves.

Another group likely to be affected by a cyclist's confession is other cyclists who doped. Arguably, one's confession can have the dual effect of making another's lies harder to bear by illuminating conflicting moral evaluations while, simultaneously, highlighting the negative consequences of confessing. This point could change, however, if confessing to doping became a widespread practice endorsed by numerous elite athletes. Applying the aggregation viewpoint proposed by Bok, one can foresee a

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<sup>7</sup> Kjærgaard's recitation of the headline is wrong. The actual headline translates into "Told the wife about his lie".

turning point in which a magnitude of confessions contributes to a more understanding public and reduces the present intense focus on the few athletes who do confess.

This observation leads to a closing argument. Because the particular harms analysed in this paper are contextually dependent, answers to the question of whether elite athletes who doped are morally obliged to confess are contextually dependent. This paper considers the specific circumstances of former professional road cyclists who doped. At least in the current Western context, I put into question the existence of a moral obligation to confess. Serious harms—illuminated herein through the perspective of narrative identity—result from extensive negative media coverage, public condemnation, and a general lack of willingness to understand the cyclist's perspective. While one can see from the aggregation viewpoint that confession can be a step towards a more understanding environment, it seems wrong to place the burden of taking that first step on athletes in the present context.

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