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Motivation's Pick-Me-Upper: Enhancing Performance Through Motivation-Enhancing Drugs

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In "Enhancing Motivation by Use of Prescription Stimulants: The Ethics of Motivation Enhancement," Torben Kjærsgaard (2015) argues that the term "cognitive enhancing substances"—prescription drugs, typically stimulants, that are taken by healthy individuals to enhance performance—is problematic because the drugs do not enhance cognitive functions, such as memory and information processing. Rather, so-called cognitive enhancing substances work by minimizing fatigue and enhancing motivation. Therefore, the effects of these drugs are best described as performance maintenance and not performance enhancement. Drawing this conclusion about cognitive enhancing substances¹ means that the typical ways that we discuss the ethical implications of stimulant use by healthy individuals are misguided. However, making this shift in terminology appropriately redirects our ethical discussion to stimulants' effects on healthy individuals' motivation. Additionally, more attention to motivation enhancement is warranted because sometimes motivation enhancement is unethical.

In this commentary I challenge Kjærsgaard's argument on a technical point, a point with implications for how we discuss the ethics of cognitive enhancing substances. I challenge his conclusion that the motivating effects of cognitive enhancing substances are not best characterized as performance enhancement. I challenge his conclusion on the grounds that both life's ordinary, daily activities and life's extraordinary activities are types of performances necessary for living the kinds of lives that we want to live, which can be enhanced, not just maintained, with the effects of cognitive enhancing substances. "Cognitive enhancing substances" may be a misleading term, but referring to the effects of cognitive enhancing substances as performance maintenance, rather than performance enhancing, misguidedly minimizes the role that motivation plays into our self-determined lives.

Kjærsgaard does not provide much support for his contention that the motivating effects of stimulants² on

healthy users are better characterized as performance maintenance. In absence of an argument, first I offer a description of performance that can inform conclusions about motivation enhancement. A performance can be thought of as a task that requires the interaction of multiple processes, activities, and behaviors (as well as desirable environmental conditions) for its accomplishment; one of these necessary processes is motivation. Our lives can be thought of as a series of performances. We complete daily, mundane activities, such as brushing our teeth or combing our hair. But our lives are also filled with much more difficult and complex tasks, such as completing advanced degrees or training for a marathon.

Both mundane and extraordinary tasks are complex and add to the value of our lives, but require motivation for their completion. One can imagine being sick in bed and not having the motivation to brush one's teeth, or really hating running and really loving to eat fatty foods and not having the motivation to properly train for a marathon. In this example, we may have the cognitive abilities necessary to perform these tasks, but without the addition of motivation, our cognitive skills alone are not enough for the completion of such tasks.

Using stimulants that enhance motivation, albeit not cognition, can greatly improve the likelihood of successfully completing our life's tasks by giving us the push that we need to do those things that we want to do and those things that we know we ought to do, for example, pick an apple over a candy bar while training for a marathon. Sometimes we have the intelligence and the skills to complete life's tasks but not the will.

Referring to stimulants as performance maintenance, rather than performance enhancement, diminishes the complexities of the processes needed to complete tasks. It also diminishes the role that motivation plays in the completion of tasks and stimulants' ability to augment motivation,³ thus enhancing our life's performances. The effects of stimulants do not just maintain life's performances, in

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1. Here I use the term "cognitive enhancing substances" to retain the terminology that is currently used in the debate that Kjærsgaard's article is a part of. Any reference to "cognitive enhancing substances" from this point on is for this purpose.

2. From this point forward, I use the term "stimulants" as a way to mitigate the terminology that the cognitive enhancing substances literature uses and Kjærsgaard's argument that cognitive enhancing substances is an inappropriate and misleading term. I use the term "stimulants" because most of the drugs that can enhance motivation, such as Adderall and Ritalin, are considered stimulants.

3. Kjærsgaard admits that stimulants can augment motivation and cites several sources to support this claim.

the sense that they only sustain activities; stimulants do more than sustain activities, they enhance life's performances by supplementing our cognitive processes with will. And for some individuals, without the will supplied by stimulants the performance of some tasks would be impossible even if they possessed superb cognitive skills.

I have argued that stimulants can motivate the performance of tasks that healthy individuals might not have completed without the use of stimulants, making the effects of stimulants performance enhancing, rather than performance maintaining. Given the effects of motivation-enhancing substances on performance, the typical ethical arguments that are a part of the performance enhancement debate (physical, cognitive, and mood) are also applicable to motivation enhancers. These ethical considerations include those listed by Kjærsgaard: inequality and cheating.

Referring back to the example of running a marathon, if a marathon runner uses motivation-enhancing substances to prepare for her race, some may say that she is cheating. Assuming that there are no rules against the use of such drugs, the real concern is inequality, that the use of drugs puts her competitors at a disadvantageous position for acquiring victory and puts her in an advantageous position (Bostrom and Roache 2011). Since the completion of tasks requires a multitude of actions and behaviors, the runner's performance is enhanced by her use of motivation enhancers. It is possible that if it were not for the motivation provided by her drug use she would have sat on the couch eating potato chips instead of training, even though she has the cognitive ability to know that this is not the best way to train for a marathon. Surely her competitors who did not have the help of motivation enhancers⁴ and who skipped a few training workouts would rather that she sat out a few training sessions so that they had a better

chance at winning. In this example, without the use of drugs the marathon runner would not have successfully completed her performance, leaving us to question the ethical nature of the means by which she used to accomplish her task. Enhancing motivation via drug use is subject to the same concerns that are currently a part of the performance enhancement debate, even if the drugs do not directly enhance cognition but are just a part of the performance process because they can be used to unfairly secure victory.

In this commentary I have argued that enhancing motivation enhances performance, even if motivation-enhancing substances do not directly enhance cognition. This means that motivation enhancers are performance enhancers, not just motivation maintenance. I have also argued that the ethical concerns that are a part of the cognitive enhancement debate are legitimate concerns even if stimulants do not directly enhance cognition. Performing tasks requires the interaction of the right behaviors, the right activities, and the right amount of motivation, making motivation just as vital to the completion of tasks as cognition. Diminishing motivation enhancers' abilities diminishes motivation's role in helping us live the kinds of lives that we desire.

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4. There are many imaginable reasons why motivation enhancers may not be available to her competitors that mirror other situations in which people have to perform desired tasks, such as inaccessibility or unaffordability.