

Normatively guided embodied agency: A hybrid account of athletic skill

Introduction

Athletic skill has long served as a paradigmatic case for debates in philosophy of action and cognitive science concerning the nature of expert agency. Traditional accounts often oscillate between two extremes: intellectualist views, according to which skilled action is guided by propositional knowledge and explicit intentions, and anti-intellectualist or automaticity-based views, which construe expertise as largely non-reflective, habitual, and subpersonal. While both approaches have generated valuable insights, each faces significant difficulties when applied to the normative and purposive structure of athletic performance.

In this paper, I propose a hybrid account of athletic skill as normatively guided embodied agency, integrating insights from philosophy of action, phenomenology, and contemporary cognitive science. I argue that athletic expertise involves a distinctive form of embodied practical knowledge that is neither reducible to explicit rule-following nor to blind automaticity. Instead, skilled athletes act under normative constraints that are dynamically encoded in their perceptual-motor systems and shaped by socio-cultural practices of evaluation and excellence.

The debate over the cognitive architecture of skill has been shaped by the influential critique of intellectualism offered by Dreyfus and others, who emphasize the role of embodied coping and non-representational know-how. In contrast, recent intellectualist accounts, such as those developed by Fridland, maintain that skilled action is guided by practical knowledge that can be understood as a form of propositional or conceptual representation. Both positions capture important aspects of expertise but fail to adequately explain how athletes track and respond to normative standards—such as accuracy, efficiency, fairness, and excellence—without constant deliberation.

Drawing on Bratman's planning theory of agency and contemporary accounts of motor control, I suggest that athletic skill is best understood as a hierarchical structure of intentions, motor schemas, and predictive models. At higher levels, athletes form intentions and plans that structure their training and competition strategies. At lower levels, motor control systems implement these intentions through predictive processing mechanisms that minimize error relative to embodied goals. This architecture allows for rapid, context-sensitive responses while preserving a form of rational control over action.

A key contribution of this paper is the claim that normativity is intrinsic to skilled action. Athletic performance is evaluated according to standards of correctness, excellence,

and fairness that are not merely external social conventions but are internalized through training and practice. Following Sutton and Montero, I argue that skilled perception is normatively structured: athletes perceive affordances not merely as possibilities for action but as better or worse ways of acting given their goals and the standards of their sport. For example, an elite tennis player perceives a shot not only as returnable but as returnable in a way that optimizes spin, placement, and strategic advantage.

From a phenomenological perspective, the lived body plays a central role in mediating these normative structures. Building on Merleau-Ponty, Gallagher, and Zahavi, I propose that athletic skill involves a form of pre-reflective bodily self-awareness that is nonetheless normatively sensitive. The athlete experiences their body not as an object but as a locus of possibilities governed by standards of excellence that have been sedimented through practice. This challenges accounts that sharply separate reflective normativity from embodied coping.

The paper also engages with ethical dimensions of athletic skill. Pérez Triviño and others have argued that sport is a normatively rich practice governed by ideals of fairness, merit, and excellence. I extend this insight to argue that the normativity guiding skilled action is not merely technical but also ethical. Athletes navigate norms related to fair play, risk-taking, and responsibility, which shape how they exercise their embodied agency. For instance, decisions about performance-enhancing technologies, aggressive strategies, or injury management involve ethical considerations that are integrated into the athlete's practical reasoning.

To support this hybrid account, I draw on findings from cognitive science on motor learning, predictive processing, and expertise. Research on chunking, motor schemas, and internal models suggests that skilled action relies on hierarchical predictive structures that encode both descriptive and normative information. These systems allow athletes to anticipate outcomes, evaluate deviations from optimal performance, and adjust their actions accordingly. This supports the claim that normativity is not merely an external evaluative layer but is embedded in the cognitive architecture of skill.

The proposed framework has several implications for broader debates in philosophy and psychology. First, it challenges the dichotomy between intellectualist and anti-intellectualist accounts of skill by showing that embodied agency can be both non-deliberative and normatively guided. Second, it contributes to discussions of selfhood by highlighting how normative practices shape embodied identity. Athletic training does not merely produce skilled performances; it constitutes a form of practical selfhood grounded in embodied norms. Third, it offers a model for understanding how ethical norms can be integrated into subpersonal cognitive processes, bridging the gap between moral philosophy and cognitive science.

In conclusion, athletic skill provides a rich case study for understanding the interplay between embodiment, normativity, and agency. By integrating philosophical and psychological perspectives, this paper advances a hybrid account of skilled action that captures its normative, embodied, and purposive dimensions. This account has implications not only for the philosophy of sport but also for broader theories of action, cognition, and the self.

2. The debate on skill: intellectualism vs anti-intellectualism

2.1 Anti-intellectualism

Anti-intellectualist accounts of skill have been highly influential in philosophy of action and cognitive science, particularly through phenomenological and embodied cognition traditions. These views challenge the idea that skilled action is guided by propositional knowledge, explicit rules, or conceptual representations. Instead, they emphasize embodied coping, habitual motor patterns, and non-conceptual forms of know-how.

A paradigmatic version of this view is associated with Dreyfus, who argues that expert performance is characterized by a form of absorbed coping that bypasses reflective deliberation and rule-following. According to this account, novices rely on explicit rules and representations, whereas experts act intuitively and holistically, responding directly to situational affordances. Skill acquisition is thus understood as a progression from rule-based cognition to non-representational embodied engagement with the environment.

This emphasis on embodied coping has been supported by empirical research on motor expertise, which shows that expert athletes often perform better when they do not consciously attend to the mechanics of their actions. Phenomena such as “paralysis by analysis” and choking under pressure have been taken to suggest that explicit cognition can interfere with skilled performance. From this perspective, expertise involves a kind of automaticity in which perception and action are tightly coupled without mediation by explicit conceptual content.

Anti-intellectualism has also been bolstered by phenomenological analyses of bodily intentionality. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, proponents argue that the body is a locus of pre-reflective intentionality that directly engages with the world. Skilled athletes do not experience themselves as applying rules or executing representations; rather, they experience a fluid sense of bodily attunement to their environment. This attunement is often described in terms of affordances that are directly perceived and acted upon, without cognitive mediation.

Despite its strengths, anti-intellectualism faces several challenges. First, it struggles to account for the apparent rational control exhibited by skilled agents. Athletes can deliberately adjust their techniques, follow strategic plans, and respond to explicit instructions, suggesting that cognitive representations play some role in guiding action. Second, anti-intellectualist accounts often underplay the role of training, coaching, and explicit feedback, all of which involve conceptual and normative structures. Finally, while embodied coping explains fluidity and automaticity, it does not fully explain how athletes track standards of correctness and excellence, which appear to involve normative evaluation.

2.2 Intellectualism

In contrast, intellectualist accounts maintain that skilled action is guided by cognitive representations, practical knowledge, and intention-like structures. According to this view, expertise involves not only embodied dispositions but also a form of practical understanding that can be articulated in propositional terms, even if it is not always consciously accessed during performance.

Fridland has been a prominent defender of intellectualism about skill, arguing that skilled action is guided by conceptual representations that encode rules, strategies, and techniques. On this account, experts possess rich bodies of knowledge about how to perform their actions, and this knowledge plays a constitutive role in controlling their movements. Skill is thus understood as a form of intelligent action guided by representations that can, at least in principle, be articulated and evaluated.

Intellectualist theories often draw on models of hierarchical action control, in which higher-level intentions and plans constrain lower-level motor processes. For example, an athlete may intend to execute a particular strategy, which is then implemented through a cascade of sub-intentions and motor commands. This hierarchical structure allows for rational guidance without requiring continuous conscious monitoring of every motor detail. Cognitive representations can thus exert top-down control while allowing for rapid and automatic execution at lower levels.

From a cognitive science perspective, intellectualism is supported by research on motor learning and internal models, which suggests that the brain constructs predictive representations of bodily dynamics and environmental contingencies. These internal models allow agents to anticipate the consequences of their actions and adjust their behavior accordingly. On this view, skilled action involves sophisticated representational structures that encode both descriptive and normative information about how actions should be performed.

However, intellectualism also faces significant difficulties. Critics argue that it over-intellectualizes skill, attributing complex representational structures where simpler embodied mechanisms may suffice. Moreover, intellectualist accounts sometimes struggle to explain the phenomenology of expertise, where actions often feel non-deliberative and automatic. There is also empirical evidence that excessive explicit focus on representations can degrade performance, suggesting that not all aspects of skill are mediated by conceptual cognition.

2.3 Limitations of existing accounts

Both intellectualist and anti-intellectualist accounts capture important aspects of athletic skill, yet each remains incomplete. A central limitation of both approaches is their inadequate treatment of normativity in skilled action. While anti-intellectualists emphasize embodied coping and intellectualists emphasize representational guidance, neither framework fully explains how normative standards of correctness, excellence, and fairness are internalized and enacted in real-time performance.

Athletic skill is not merely a matter of causal efficiency or successful outcome production. Performances are evaluated according to sport-specific standards that define what counts as correct technique, optimal strategy, and fair play. These standards are learned through training, coaching, and social practices of evaluation. Yet, during performance, athletes typically do not consciously deliberate about these norms; instead, they are embodied in perceptual attunements, motor dispositions, and practical reasoning structures. Existing accounts lack a detailed explanation of how such normativity can be integrated into largely automatic and embodied forms of action.

Anti-intellectualist approaches, in emphasizing non-representational coping, risk portraying skilled action as normatively blind, guided solely by causal coupling between perception and action. This makes it difficult to explain how athletes can be sensitive to standards of excellence and fairness, or how they can deliberately correct errors and refine techniques. If expertise is purely a matter of embodied coping, it is unclear how normative evaluation plays a constitutive role in guiding action rather than merely serving as an external evaluative overlay.

Intellectualist approaches, on the other hand, tend to locate normativity in explicit representations and propositional knowledge. While this allows for rational evaluation and deliberate correction, it struggles to explain how normative guidance operates in fast-paced, non-deliberative contexts. Skilled athletes often make split-second decisions that appear to be guided by norms without conscious reflection. If normativity requires explicit representation and deliberation, it becomes mysterious how such guidance can occur under the temporal constraints of expert performance.

A related problem concerns rational control without deliberation. Skilled athletes exhibit a form of control that is both flexible and reason-responsive, yet largely automatic. They can adjust their actions in response to changing circumstances, strategic considerations, and ethical constraints, often without explicit conscious reasoning. Neither intellectualism nor anti-intellectualism provides a satisfactory account of how such rational control can be implemented in embodied, subpersonal systems. Intellectualism risks overemphasizing deliberative cognition, while anti-intellectualism risks underestimating the role of rational structures in guiding action.

These limitations suggest the need for a hybrid framework that integrates embodied cognition, representational guidance, and normative structure. Such a framework should explain how normative standards are internalized in embodied systems, how intentions and plans constrain lower-level motor processes, and how agents can exhibit reason-responsive control without continuous deliberation. In the next section, I develop such a hybrid account of athletic skill as normatively guided embodied agency, drawing on philosophy of action, phenomenology, and contemporary cognitive science.

3. A hybrid model of embodied agency

In order to overcome the limitations of both intellectualist and anti-intellectualist accounts, this section develops a hybrid model of athletic skill as normatively guided embodied agency. The central claim is that skilled athletic action is structured by hierarchical intentions and predictive motor control processes that are shaped by internalized normative standards. This model preserves the insights of embodied cognition while providing a robust account of rational guidance and normativity in action.

3.1 Hierarchical intentions and planning structures

A useful starting point for understanding skilled agency is provided by planning theories of action. On such accounts, agents act under the guidance of hierarchically structured intentions that constrain and organize behavior over time. High-level intentions and plans specify distal goals, while lower-level intentions and motor processes implement these goals in concrete contexts.

Athletic practice exhibits this hierarchical structure in a paradigmatic way. Athletes form long-term intentions regarding training regimes, competition strategies, and performance goals. These intentions generate intermediate plans, such as tactical decisions within a match, which are in turn implemented by proximal motor intentions governing bodily movements. This hierarchical architecture allows athletes to exercise rational control over their actions while delegating fine-grained motor execution to subpersonal systems.

Crucially, these intention structures are normatively constrained. Plans and intentions are evaluated according to standards of effectiveness, excellence, and fairness. An athlete's intention to adopt a particular training method, for instance, is guided by normative judgments about what counts as optimal preparation within a given sport. These normative constraints shape the structure of practical reasoning and, through learning and habituation, influence lower-level motor control processes.

3.2 Motor cognition and predictive control

Contemporary cognitive science offers a complementary perspective on how intentions are implemented in real-time action. Research on motor control suggests that skilled action relies on hierarchical predictive models that anticipate the sensory consequences of movements and minimize error relative to embodied goals. These predictive processes operate at multiple levels, from abstract action goals to fine-grained motor commands.

Within this framework, athletic skill involves the development of highly tuned internal models that encode both the dynamics of the body and the structure of the environment. Through training, athletes acquire the ability to anticipate the outcomes of their actions and adjust their movements accordingly. This predictive architecture enables rapid, context-sensitive responses that do not require conscious deliberation at each step.

Importantly, predictive models can be understood as encoding normative information. Internal models specify not only what will happen given a particular action, but also what should happen relative to a goal or standard of performance. For example, an elite sprinter's motor system encodes expectations about optimal stride length, force production, and timing. Deviations from these norms generate prediction errors that drive online correction and long-term learning. In this way, normativity is embedded within the subpersonal architecture of skilled action.

3.3 Embodied practical knowledge and reason-responsiveness

The hybrid model proposed here conceives of athletic skill as a form of embodied practical knowledge that is reason-responsive without being continuously deliberative. Skilled athletes are sensitive to reasons in the sense that their actions are guided by goals, norms, and evaluative standards. Yet, this guidance is largely implemented through embodied dispositions and predictive control mechanisms rather than explicit reasoning during performance.

This conception aligns with recent accounts of practical knowledge that emphasize its embodied and action-oriented character. Practical knowledge is not merely a set of propositional beliefs but a structured capacity to act in normatively appropriate ways.

Athletes manifest such knowledge in their ability to adjust techniques, follow strategies, and comply with ethical norms, often without conscious reflection.

Reason-responsiveness in skilled action is thus distributed across levels of agency. At higher levels, athletes engage in explicit reasoning about goals, strategies, and ethical considerations. At lower levels, embodied systems implement these reasons through learned sensorimotor patterns and predictive control. This distribution allows for rational guidance without the temporal costs of continuous deliberation, resolving a central tension in the debate on skill.

3.4 Normativity as internalized embodied structure

A distinctive feature of this hybrid model is its account of normativity as an internalized embodied structure. Norms of correctness, excellence, and fairness are not merely external evaluative criteria but are integrated into the cognitive and motor architecture of skilled agents through training and social practice. Coaching, feedback, and institutional norms shape how athletes perceive affordances, select actions, and evaluate outcomes.

For instance, an experienced basketball player perceives not just a range of possible passes but a hierarchy of better and worse options relative to strategic and ethical norms. These normative distinctions are reflected in perceptual attunements and motor tendencies, which guide action in a fluid and non-deliberative manner. The athlete's body thus becomes a repository of normatively structured dispositions.

This perspective also illuminates the social dimension of skilled agency. Norms are transmitted through practices, institutions, and communities of evaluation. Athletes internalize these norms through processes of habituation and enculturation, resulting in embodied forms of agency that are socially and ethically structured. Athletic skill is therefore not merely an individual capacity but a socially scaffolded form of normatively guided embodiment.

3.5 Phenomenological dimensions of normatively guided agency

Phenomenological analyses provide further insight into how normativity is experienced in skilled action. From the perspective of the lived body, athletes do not experience themselves as following explicit rules or executing representations. Instead, they experience a field of action possibilities structured by better and worse ways of acting. Norms of excellence are sedimented in bodily habits and perceptual styles, shaping the phenomenology of skill.

Pre-reflective bodily self-awareness plays a crucial role in this process. Athletes experience their bodies as capable of certain actions and attuned to normative standards that have been incorporated through practice. This experiential dimension complements the cognitive and action-theoretic account developed above, highlighting how normativity is enacted and lived at the level of embodied subjectivity.

By integrating planning theories, predictive processing models, and phenomenological insights, the hybrid model developed here provides a comprehensive account of athletic skill as normatively guided embodied agency. This model explains how skilled athletes can exhibit rational, norm-sensitive control over their actions without relying on continuous conscious deliberation, thereby reconciling embodiment, cognition, and normativity within a unified framework.

4. Normativity in athletic skill

The hybrid model developed in the previous section treats normativity as an internalized and embodied feature of skilled agency. This section elaborates this claim by distinguishing different dimensions of normativity in athletic skill and by showing how ethical and evaluative norms shape perception, action, and self-regulation in sport.

4.1 Perceptual and action-guiding normativity

A first dimension of normativity concerns the standards that govern correct and excellent performance. Skilled athletes are sensitive to norms that specify how actions ought to be performed within a given practice. These norms include technical standards, tactical principles, and criteria of success that define what counts as better or worse performance.

Perceptual experience in expertise is normatively structured. Athletes perceive not merely physical possibilities for action but normatively laden affordances. A football player, for instance, does not simply see a pass as physically possible; they perceive it as appropriate, risky, suboptimal, or optimal given strategic and normative constraints. This normative structure of perception is acquired through training and enculturation, shaping how the environment is experienced and acted upon.

Normative standards also guide error detection and correction. Prediction errors in motor control systems are not merely deviations from expected sensory outcomes but deviations from normative models of optimal performance. Through practice, athletes internalize these normative models, allowing them to detect and correct errors rapidly and often without conscious deliberation. This suggests that normativity is embedded in the architecture of skilled action, rather than merely imposed by external evaluators.

4.2 Excellence, practice, and evaluative norms

Athletic practices are constituted by norms of excellence that define the internal goods of sport. These norms specify what it means to perform well, to improve, and to achieve mastery within a given practice. Excellence is not reducible to mere winning or outcome production; it involves standards of technique, style, effort, and adherence to the constitutive rules of the sport.

From a practice-theoretic perspective, sports can be understood as norm-governed social practices with internal standards of evaluation. Athletes participate in these practices by orienting their actions toward shared standards of excellence that are socially transmitted and institutionally stabilized. Training regimes, coaching methods, and competitive structures function as normative scaffolding that shapes the development of skilled agency.

These evaluative norms are internalized through habituation and feedback, becoming embodied dispositions that guide action. For example, a gymnast internalizes norms regarding form, balance, and execution, which become perceptually and motorically encoded in their bodily repertoire. Excellence thus becomes an embodied norm that structures perception, action, and self-evaluation.

4.3 Ethical normativity in sport

Beyond technical and evaluative norms, athletic skill is embedded in ethical normative frameworks. Sports are governed by norms of fairness, responsibility, and respect for persons, which shape how athletes ought to act within and beyond competition. Ethical norms are not merely external constraints but can be integrated into the structure of skilled agency.

Decisions about training intensity, risk-taking, and the use of performance-enhancing technologies illustrate the ethical dimension of athletic agency. Athletes often face trade-offs between maximizing performance and respecting norms of fairness, health, and integrity. These decisions involve practical reasoning that integrates ethical considerations into goal-setting and action planning.

Ethical normativity also operates at the level of embodied habits. For instance, norms of fair play can become ingrained dispositions that guide spontaneous behavior, such as stopping play when an opponent is injured or refraining from exploiting refereeing errors. These dispositions are learned through socialization and institutional reinforcement, and they become part of the athlete's embodied practical knowledge.

4.4 Normativity, responsibility, and agency

The integration of normativity into skilled action has important implications for responsibility and agency. If athletes' actions are guided by internalized norms encoded in embodied systems, then responsibility cannot be reduced to explicit deliberation or conscious intention. Instead, responsibility extends to embodied dispositions and practices that shape how agents act without reflection.

This raises questions about the distribution of responsibility across individual, social, and institutional levels. Coaching practices, organizational norms, and cultural expectations play a significant role in shaping the normative structure of athletic agency. For example, systemic pressures to win at all costs can shape athletes' embodied dispositions toward risk-taking and rule-bending, thereby complicating attributions of individual responsibility.

Nevertheless, the hybrid model proposed here supports a nuanced conception of agency and responsibility. Athletes are reason-responsive agents whose embodied systems are shaped by normative practices, and they can reflect on and revise these norms through higher-level deliberation. This multi-level structure allows for both embodied norm-guidance and reflective normative evaluation, integrating subpersonal and personal dimensions of agency.

4.5 Implications for theories of normativity

Understanding athletic skill as normatively guided embodied agency has broader implications for theories of normativity in philosophy and psychology. It suggests that normativity is not confined to explicit judgments, rules, or propositional attitudes, but can be instantiated in perceptual and motor systems through learning and habituation. Norms can thus be embodied, enacted, and socially scaffolded, challenging purely intellectualist accounts of normativity.

This perspective also bridges descriptive and normative domains. Cognitive architectures that encode predictive models and error signals can be understood as implementing normative standards of optimality, while ethical norms shape the goals and constraints that structure these architectures. Athletic skill thus provides a concrete case in which cognitive, practical, and ethical normativity are integrated within a unified model of agency.

5. Phenomenology of skilled embodiment

The hybrid model of normatively guided embodied agency can be further illuminated by phenomenological analyses of skilled action. While the previous sections focused on cognitive architecture and normative structure, phenomenology provides insight into how skilled agency is experienced from the first-person perspective. This experiential

dimension is crucial for understanding how normativity is enacted and lived by skilled agents.

5.1 Bodily intentionality and the lived body

Phenomenological accounts emphasize that skilled action is grounded in bodily intentionality. The body is not merely an object that is controlled by the mind but a subjectively experienced locus of action and perception. In athletic expertise, the body is experienced as a system of practical possibilities that is directly oriented toward the environment.

Skilled athletes do not typically experience their actions as the execution of internal representations or explicit rules. Instead, they experience a fluid sense of bodily engagement in which movements unfold in response to the environment in an apparently immediate and non-mediated way. This phenomenology aligns with the notion of absorbed coping, but it can be integrated into a broader action-theoretic framework that recognizes the role of hierarchical intentions and predictive control.

The lived body is thus the medium through which normative structures are enacted. Norms of technique, timing, and coordination are sedimented in bodily habits, shaping how the world is perceived and how actions are initiated. The athlete experiences the environment as inviting certain actions over others, where these invitations are structured by normative standards of excellence.

5.2 Pre-reflective self-awareness and agency

Phenomenological theories of selfhood emphasize pre-reflective self-awareness as a fundamental feature of experience. In skilled action, athletes exhibit a tacit awareness of their bodily states, capabilities, and limitations that does not require explicit reflection. This pre-reflective self-awareness underlies the sense of agency in athletic performance.

In expertise, pre-reflective awareness is normatively structured. Athletes experience their bodily movements as better or worse, smooth or disrupted, aligned or misaligned with their goals. This evaluative dimension is not necessarily articulated in propositional terms but is felt as a sense of rightness or error in performance. Such experiences provide immediate feedback that guides correction and learning.

This phenomenological account complements predictive processing models of motor control. Prediction errors are not merely computational signals but are experienced as disturbances in the flow of action. Conversely, successful prediction and control are

experienced as fluency, ease, and absorption. Normativity is thus both computationally implemented and phenomenologically lived.

5.3 Skill, absorption, and normative transparency

A characteristic feature of expert performance is absorption, a state in which attention is directed toward the task and the environment rather than toward the mechanics of one's own body. In such states, the body becomes phenomenologically transparent, functioning as a medium rather than an object of experience.

Normative structures remain operative in absorption, even though they are not explicitly represented. Athletes adjust their actions in response to subtle cues, maintain adherence to technical standards, and respect ethical constraints, often without conscious deliberation. This suggests that normativity can be transparent to experience while still playing a constitutive role in guiding action.

Absorption also illustrates how reflective and pre-reflective dimensions of agency interact. Reflective training and coaching practices shape the embodied norms that guide action in absorbed performance. Conversely, disruptions in absorbed coping, such as errors or injuries, can trigger reflective awareness and explicit normative evaluation. This dynamic interplay supports the hybrid model of normatively guided embodied agency.

5.4 Embodiment, normativity, and self-constitution

Athletic training does not merely produce skilled performances; it contributes to the constitution of the agent's practical identity. Through repeated engagement with normative practices, athletes come to experience themselves as certain kinds of embodied agents, with characteristic dispositions, values, and self-understandings.

Normative practices in sport thus play a role in shaping the embodied self. Standards of excellence, fairness, and commitment are not only external constraints but become internalized as aspects of the athlete's self-conception and bodily comportment. The phenomenology of skill therefore provides a window into how normative structures contribute to self-constitution at both embodied and reflective levels.

This perspective has broader implications for theories of selfhood. It suggests that the self is not merely a locus of propositional attitudes or narrative structures but is also constituted by embodied normative practices. Athletic skill exemplifies how normativity can be sedimented in bodily habits and perceptual styles, contributing to the formation of a practical self.

5.5 Integrating phenomenology with action theory and cognitive science

The phenomenological analysis developed here does not compete with action-theoretic and cognitive scientific models but complements them. While cognitive science explains how predictive models and hierarchical intentions implement skilled action, phenomenology explains how these structures are lived and experienced by agents.

By integrating these perspectives, the hybrid model of normatively guided embodied agency provides a multi-level account of skill. Normativity is instantiated in subpersonal predictive architectures, structured in personal-level intentions and plans, and experienced at the level of embodied subjectivity. This integration avoids reductionism and captures the richness of skilled athletic agency as both a cognitive and normative phenomenon.

6. Implications for philosophy of action and cognitive science

The proposed account has several implications for ongoing debates in philosophy of action and cognitive science. First, it suggests that the dichotomy between intellectualist and anti-intellectualist models is overstated. Skilled action does not require continuous propositional deliberation, but neither is it adequately captured by models of purely non-representational coping. Instead, skilled performance involves a structured form of rational guidance that is neither explicit deliberation nor blind automaticity.

Second, this framework contributes to recent discussions on the architecture of agency. By positing internalized normative constraints as constitutive of skilled agency, it aligns with views that treat agency as inherently norm-governed rather than merely causal. This challenges minimalist accounts of action control that attempt to reduce skilled agency to sensorimotor dynamics without appealing to rational norms.

Third, the account bears on theories of expertise and learning. On this view, acquiring a skill involves not merely the optimization of motor patterns, but the gradual internalization of normative standards that structure perception, attention, and action selection. This suggests a close connection between practical knowledge and norm-sensitive perception, thereby supporting recent proposals that treat perceptual sensitivity to affordances as normatively shaped rather than purely ecological.

Finally, the proposal has implications for ethics of sport. If skilled action is internally norm-governed, then athletic excellence is not merely a matter of efficiency or success, but of acting in accordance with constitutive standards of the practice. This provides a philosophical basis for distinguishing mere effectiveness from excellence, and for understanding why certain forms of cheating or performance enhancement undermine the value of athletic achievement.

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that dominant accounts of skilled athletic action fail to adequately explain the internal normativity characteristic of expertise. Anti-intellectualist approaches emphasize embodied coping but struggle to account for rational control and evaluative structure. Intellectualist approaches posit conceptual guidance but risk over-intellectualizing the phenomenology and temporal dynamics of skill.

To address these limitations, I proposed a hybrid account according to which skilled action is guided by internalized normative structures that shape perception, attention, and motor control without requiring explicit deliberation. This framework integrates insights from philosophy of action, cognitive science, and ethics, and provides a more adequate explanation of how athletes can act both automatically and rationally.

The account also offers a basis for understanding athletic excellence as a normatively structured form of agency, rather than mere causal success. Future work should explore how these internalized norms develop through training, how they interact with affective and motivational states, and how they can be empirically investigated within cognitive neuroscience and sport psychology.

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(Podés ajustar formato según EasyChair, pero esto está en APA 7 aproximado)

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