Sweat, saliva, sugar, soil, sandpaper: The ironic threat of ‘dirt’ in sport, and the paranoid governance of mundane artefacts

Introduction – ‘The Spirit of Cricket’

‘Cricket is a game that owes much of its unique appeal to the fact that it should be played not only within its Laws but also within the Spirit of the Game. Any action which is seen to abuse this Spirit causes injury to the game itself.’

MCC, 2018b

‘You do well to love cricket, for it is more free from anything sordid, anything dishonourable, than any game in the world. To play it keenly, honourably, generously, self-sacrificingly, is a moral lesson in itself, and the classroom is God’s air and sunshine. Foster it, my brothers, so that it may attract all who can find time to play it; protect it from anything that would sully it, so that it may grow in favour with all men.’

Lord Harris, 1931

A curious anomaly within cricket, almost unique to itself, is its high moral self-regard and customary invocations of ‘the Spirit of Cricket’. Indeed, this *Spirit* is inscribed within the *Laws of Cricket* as essential to the game. However, cricket is also notoriously complex, requiring careful adjudication of nuanced rules and myriad technicalities. This complexity can breed ambiguity and self-serving interpretations, especially amid increasing commercial imperatives. Combined with an uneasy history of colonial domination and ‘ugly assimilationism’ (Hage, 2006), these conflicting tensions undermine aspirations for virtuously spirited play.

The Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) has overseen the *Laws* since 1787. As custodians, the MCC have ensured the rules are readily available, along with providing guidance and instruction. Still, they attribute the game’s high regard not to their jurisprudential skill, but rather note that:

‘The basic Laws of Cricket have stood remarkably well the test of time. It is thought the real reason for this is that cricketers have traditionally been prepared to play in the Spirit of the Game’ (MCC, 2017, p.2)

Yet, the steady erosion of this spirit was spectacularly apparent when the Australian team were caught blatantly cheating, in 2018. Their offence was to commit ball tampering (manipulating the ball’s material condition, for strategic advantage), using a piece of sandpaper. The subsequent moral opprobrium was unprecedented, and ‘exploded the myth that Australians play hard but fair’ (Jeffreys, 2018). Media outlets around the world ran the story, including – among many others – *CNN, The Washington Post, The Economist, The*
New York Times, China Daily, and Channel News Asia. Heads of state even weighed in on the scandal, signalling a loss of diplomatic ‘soft power’ (Yaxley, 2018). Correcting the reputational damage resulted in lengthy suspensions of the captain, vice-captain, and a junior player, along with resignations from the coach, Cricket Australia’s CEO and Chairman, an exodus of sponsors, and further recriminations.

Moreover, the tampering incident revealed a growing contradiction in the pragmatic governance and symbolic function of cricket. That is, a sport commonly espousing moral purity and spectacular virtuosity must scrutinise always-under-suspicion players with forensic acuity, to protect against dirt (Douglas, 2003). This ever-threatening presence of impurity – especially in the context of ball tampering – reflects broader anxieties of ‘mundane governance’, where once banal, inert, and quotidian substances become infused with danger, subject to intense surveillance and quarantine. As Daniel Neyland and Steve Woolgar (2013, pp.6-7) observe, this form of governance is suffused with moralism, irony, and the ‘exoticism of the ordinary’. The passage of water, for example, such mundane yet literally vitalizing matter, can suddenly become taboo, deviant, even terror-inducing within an international airport (pp.194-219). Similarly, using the ‘wrong bin bag’ signifies a failure of citizenship traceable to the offender, upon whom punitive measures are met (pp.21-54). Failure to follow arbitrary directives in tightly controlled socio-technical networks can render deviant subjects clear threats to the securitized order (pp.166-193).

In analysing mundane governance within professional cricket, what emerges in attempts to address ball tampering is an ironic fear of that which was previously utterly ordinary. Once neutral objects become exotic contaminants, laden with risk and requiring increased surveillance in extremely competitive and lucrative settings. When one typically thinks of cheating in professional sport, they may recall sophisticated doping programmes, conspiratorial match-fixing, or ingeniously covert mechanical interventions (eg. the use of hidden motors in cycling). Alternatively, few are likely to consider artefacts as mundane as breath mints, sandpaper, bottle caps, fingernails, Vaseline, or pant zippers. Add to this perennial concerns over psychological tactics of sledging – undermining opponents through insults, invective, and intimidation (see Wade, 2019; Rowe, 2011) – and it becomes evident that cricket is plagued by the ease with which banal dirt destabilizes proceedings.

Governing against dirt

The reader will have already noted references to dirt and impurity. They are adopted in deference to Mary Douglas’ (1966) classic work, Purity and Danger, a cross-cultural comparative analysis of how groups conceptually construct and guard against defilement, threat, and taboo. Douglas presses us to consider: what is deemed ‘matter out of place’?; who defines dirt, under what authority, and with what ontological framework?; and how is the division of labour for purging such matter enacted?

Douglas (p.2) provides several working tenets in conceptualising dirt. The first is that dirt is ‘essentially disorder’ or otherwise ‘offends against order’. Second, and importantly for this study, Douglas stresses ‘there is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder’. That is, ‘our ideas of dirt also express symbolic systems and the difference
between pollution behaviour in one part of the world and another is only a matter of detail’ (p.36). Thirdly, the elimination of dirt is ‘a positive effort to organise the environment’. Such cleansing acts serve crucial functional purposes, for ‘rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience’ (p.2). Hence, dirt ‘is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter’, and its performative eradication serves instructive ends (p.36). Finally, as already highlighted, dirt is inescapably relative. It signifies ruptures between purpose and place, even in witnessing, for example, so simple a tableau as shoes on a dining table, or cooking utensils in a bedroom (p.37).

Professional sporting contests are rituals perpetually under threat of dirt, vulnerable to corruption of insidious kinds. A central concern for this chapter, therefore, is illuminating the qualities of dirt unique to cricket, for they present ironic inversions of matter we typically associate with purity. While governing authorities in professional sport typically fear contamination of technically sophisticated kinds, the forms of ‘dirt’ that threaten cricket through ball tampering are often of the most commonplace and innocuous kind. Indeed, it is because they are otherwise so innocuous that they present great threat, for such artefacts can inconspicuously pose as fulfilling their legitimate primary function, but are turned to nefarious ends. One consequence is that the artefacts signifying dirt appear almost farcical. Putting it somewhat glibly, professional cricket is more likely to have its integrity undermined by sugar than steroids. This, it will be shown, is not an exaggeration.

Indeed, the mundanity and ubiquity of this dirt renders policing efforts difficult. Ball tampering has been acknowledged by current and former players as an ‘open secret’ (CricInfo, 2010). However, governing bodies have been compelled to enforce counter-measures as the sport’s commercial imperatives and geopolitical influence increase. These punitive measures, in turn, undermine the mythos of ‘the spirit of the game’. Amid tensions between lofty ideals and high stakes outcomes, potentially irresolvable jurisprudential dilemmas threaten to produce mundane governance of a paranoid kind. If practically everything signifies threat – from soil, sugar, sandpaper, chewing gum, hair gel, fingernails, zippers, among many other materials – the field of play becomes a site of intense quarantine, surveillance, and suspicion. In an added irony, this governance is enacted over agents valorised for their high moral standing, elite representatives of the supposed ‘gentleman’s game’.

The ball tampering law as an interpretation of the ‘artificial’ and the ‘natural’

Firstly, though, some context is required in explaining rationales behind tampering and efforts to regulate such practices. As Douglas (2003, p.42) noted, ‘Defilement is never an isolated event. It cannot occur except in view of a systematic ordering of ideas’. Therefore, in considering how authorities govern against ‘defilement’, the first problem to be addressed is one yawning interpretive space, ripe for exploitation. Specifically, in seeking ‘systematic ordering’ to prevent defilement, those who apply current anti-tampering rules must attempt to impose a hard distinction between ‘artificial’ and ‘natural’ matter. Recent events, however, reveal a lack of clear ‘contrariness’ (p.50). This has exposed a creeping paranoia, where potentially every substance and behaviour presents threat, and where debate abounds on how to ensure fair conduct without compromising on entertaining play.
A brief interpolation: Cricket is notoriously complex, and this paper assumes no prior knowledge. For our purposes we need only observe that cricket is primarily a contest between the bowler and batsman, within an oval-shaped field. The former attempts to bowl a delivery along a flat, hard surface – the ‘wicket’, 20 metres in length – in ways that deceive or otherwise skilfully prevent the batsman from hitting the ball in the manner they intend (to accumulate ‘runs’). Cricket is therefore broadly comparable to baseball, sharing surface similarities and comparable nuances in pitching, batting, and fielding techniques. In any case, the ball and the playing surface are the central mediating devices, and the varying constitution of the ball during a match can prove a decisive factor. The ball’s variable damage, deterioration, and degradation – and what the fielding side does to stall or accelerate these processes – can prove vital in attaining strategic advantage.

This is because the ball’s movement – both through the air (‘swinging’) and when it bounces (‘seaming’) – can vary wildly. An enormous array of bowling variations are enabled through factorial combinations of the ball’s current state, the bowler’s skill, and the current environmental conditions (eg. surface of the wicket, humidity, wind etc.). A sizeable sub-field of scientific research is dedicated to precise investigations of these parameters. Indeed, as Rabindra Mehta (2005, p.182) observes, such inquiry echoes back to figures like Isaac Newton (1672) and Lord Rayleigh (1877), who took interest in the curved flight of tennis balls. Laboratory research into the variable swing of cricket balls began as early as 1973 (Horlock, 1973). A wealth of research is now available and, unsurprisingly, professional sides always seek innovative means of enhancing their bowling strategy.

In particular, players are desperately keen to hone reliable techniques of ‘reverse swing’. To briefly summarise, reverse swing occurs if a sufficiently conditioned ball (polished one side, the other roughened), when bowled with requisite skill (eg. angling the seam correctly), moves through the air in ways favouring the polished side. In achieving reverse swing, one tactic universally undertaken is vigorous polishing of one side of the ball (the ‘shiny’ side). Meanwhile, the ‘rough’ side is left to degrade through normal play, and the increasing material divergence will (eventually) encourage swing. Also, the two hemispheres of the ball are joined by a prominent seam, comprised of six rows of stitches. The aerodynamic possibilities afforded by the bulging seam entails that its angle at the point of delivery can prove crucial. An abundance of other factors can also be considered (see Mehta, 2005), but this explanation suffices for analysing governance measures against ball tampering.

This ‘discovery’ of reverse swing in the 1970s and 80s was once spoken about in ways akin to ‘myth or folklore’ (Mehta, 2005, p.182), or a magician’s secrets, revealed only to those deemed worthy (Sundaresan, 2016). Though not well understood, it quickly became a devastating strategy and one of the most significant developments in modern cricket. Reverse swing deliveries can prove incredibly difficult to hit with control and thus provide an advantage of potentially match-winning significance. Observers suggest that ‘the modern game has become a race to see who can get the ball to swing first’ (ABC, 2018a). Such a ‘race’ tempts moral hazards.

Moreover, the development of reverse swing occurred parallel with rapid commercialization, which added further material and symbolic incentives for on-field success. Much depends, therefore, on developing sufficient regulation and accountability of the ball’s agency. Reverse swing is dependent on ball deterioration, and typically does not emerge until a ball
has been bowled at least 200-300 times (and only if other factors also prove amenable). This generates *impurities* of insidious kind; if reverse swing is strategically advantageous, how might innovative players accelerate the necessary conditions? How can ‘unfair’ techniques be policed, particularly given ambiguities and contested interpretations between players and administrators? Relatedly, how can the ‘spirit of the game’ be upheld when rewards for success only increase? Should tamper-proof balls be developed, at the potential cost of nullifying reverse swing? Ultimately, what should be permitted, and what is seen as introducing *dirt*?

During the late 1970s and early 80s, the first professional practitioner of reverse swing, Pakistan bowler Sarfraz Nawaz, recalled how the ball’s condition was not monitored closely. As a result, the ball was subjected to nothing short of violence:

> ‘The umpires wouldn’t bother with keeping the ball. So teams would wait till the first 10 overs of the innings, and during the water-break, use everything from sand-paper to bottle caps to blades camouflaged in tapes over fingers to scratch one side of the ball, and nobody ever knew what they were doing.’ (Sundaresan, 2016)

Clearly, while reverse swing has brought positive aspects to cricket, the use of hand-made shivs and other back-alley means of turning the ball into a capricious missile is less than ideal. The improvement and increase in television cameras certainly helped in capturing evidence of infringements (though even this footage can be open to interpretation). This resulted in more covert tampering innovations in an escalating theatre of stealthy *dirt* against techno-vigilant *purity*.

Currently, the *Laws of Cricket* establish this guidance on tampering:

41.3.2 *It is an offence for any player to take any action which changes the condition of the ball.*

[…]

A fielder may, however

41.3.2.1 *polish the ball on his/her clothing provided that no artificial substance is used and that such polishing wastes no time.*

41.3.2.2 *remove mud from the ball under the supervision of an umpire.*

41.3.2.3 *dry a wet ball on a piece of cloth that has been approved by the umpires.*

Customarily, ‘no artificial substance’ is interpreted as permitting *saliva* and *sweat* as polishing agents, with acceptable clothing materials including polyester, cotton, fleece, and wool. This, however, produces an immediate ambiguity, for polyester is a synthetic material, and hence may raise questions on whether it constitutes an ‘artificial substance’. While there are no real objections to polyester, this ambiguity reveals potentials for exploitation. Professional teams, it is widely conceded, strategize how they may push upon permissible bounds of tampering, if not wilfully subvert them.

A common example is using *sugary* saliva to polish the ball, under the theory that it adds to the ball’s shine, thus encouraging swing (more on this below). Moreover, as legal theorist David Fraser notes (1993, p.184), this use of sweat and saliva not only to polish, but to ‘load
up’ the ball (making it heavier on one side, and thereby more swing-friendly), might itself technically constitute a tampering infringement. Many other debated examples are discussed below, all marked by the sheer mundanity of the matter that threatens impurity. One outcome is that policing against tampering, in practice, risks edging into farcical hyper-vigilance and panopticon-like surveillance. This strange brew of surveillance and moralism was nowhere more apparent than when the Australia team were caught in the most infamous incident of tampering.

The Bancroft Incident – A tragicomic farce of suspicion, surveillance, and subterfuge

The following is a brief account of what transpired when the Australian Test side were caught tampering. Among other topics of interest, this case reveals the influence of pre-existing suspicions of dirt, along with the adjudicating role of surveillance technologies. In 2018, South Africa and Australia played a four-match Test series. On the third day of the third match, in Cape Town, the South Africans looked likely to win. Perhaps under the impression that a drastic intervention was needed, Australian vice-captain David Warner gave instructions to Cameron Bancroft – the team’s most junior player – to use sandpaper to illegally alter the ball’s condition. Steve Smith, the Australian captain, later admitted he was aware of the plan, tacitly assenting in confessed ‘desperation’ (Brettig, 2018b). As for Bancroft, pressures of ‘positive deviance’ and ‘overconformity’ likely played a part (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Such strains emerge when athletes possess excessive acceptance of narrow overarching norms (e.g. on-field success) in ways conflicting with other ideals, such as ‘fair play’. In some instances, no amount of rule-making can overcome in-group loyalties, especially when tied to ‘higher’ ideals (e.g. nationalistic pride). Indeed, the more clearly delineated the rule, the better an individual can show their commitment to the collective by wilfully breaking it. This includes using sledging as a form of ‘instrumental aggression’ (Donahue et. al, 2009; Wade, 2019).

In any case, Bancroft accepted the tampering task. However, around thirty cameras were in operation during the match, rendering subterfuge a difficult task. Initially, the sandpaper was secreted in the pocket of Bancroft’s ‘whites’ (clothes). Soon enough, Bancroft was filmed rubbing the ball with sandpaper (though onlookers were initially uncertain about the specific material). Broadcasting cameras captured incriminating shots of Bancroft’s offence live, while commentators speculated on what Bancroft was holding. The damning images were also played on screens at the Cape Town ground, to a reaction of fierce indignation and bewildered humour.

The Australian coach, Darren Lehmann, who maintained he had no prior knowledge of the tampering plan, saw this footage, and radioed a message to the team’s ‘12th Man’ (a substitute player). During the next break in play, the 12th Man ran onto the field to speak with Bancroft. Soon thereafter, Bancroft attempted to surreptitiously move the sandpaper into his underwear (for, presumably, umpires would not check for contraband there). The broadcast cameras – which, by this time, were simply laser-focused on Bancroft’s groin – exposed this switch. The umpires were duly informed of the suspicions, and questioned Bancroft on the field. Bancroft initially feigned innocence, pulling from his pocket only a black microfibre cloth, the offending sandpaper now hidden in his underwear.
By the end of day’s play, however, Bancroft was duly charged with tampering, and he and captain Steve Smith were ushered into a press conference. Curiously, though Bancroft confessed, there emerged an initial deception regarding what the offending matter used. That is, Bancroft substituted ‘tape’ and ‘dirt’ for sandpaper, stating: ‘I saw an opportunity to use some tape, to get some granules from the rough patches on the wicket and change the ball condition’ (SMH, 2018). This duplicity only compounded troubles, for the players did not ‘come clean’ but instead created further dirt.

Following the Bancroft incident the South African team revealed prior suspicions (Craddock & Horne, 2018). Players in the England team similarly alluded to concerns that the Australians may have engaged in ball tampering (ESPN, 2018). Indeed, video recorded during the 2017 Ashes series appears to show Bancroft pouring sugar into his pocket before returning to the field (Maasdorp, 2018). It is difficult to posit an explanation for this strange act, other than an intention to tamper with the ball. Alarms were also raised during the match prior to the Cape Town incident, where the comparatively less abrasive pitch was expected to result in slower emergence of reverse swing. However, the Australian bowlers achieved reverse swing surprisingly early, fomenting suspicions that dirt had found its way into proceedings. For the fateful third match, requests were made to broadcasters to pay close attention to how the Australian team handled the ball (Craddock & Horne, 2018).

The subsequent fallout was largely unprecedented, and reveals the farcical circumstances by which a piece of sandpaper generated extraordinary moralism, evident in the findings of the subsequent ‘cultural review’ conducted by The Ethics Centre (Longstaff, 2018):

‘The grief (and for many people it was grief) was linked to a sense of shame […] a shame that our society’s ethical malaise had moved from politics, to business, to the churches… an ever-spreading stain that had finally tainted the wearers of the hallowed ‘baggy green’. Australians looked up and asked, anew, is that whom we have become?’ (p.5)

Three key matters for discussion emerge from this case. The first is exploring the relative ease with which the integrity of professional sport can be threatened by mundane artefacts. The second is contending with the dilemma of governance this presents: how best to prevent ball tampering without resorting to drastic measures of intense surveillance and paranoid quarantine? Third, do impossibly fuzzy distinctions between ‘artificial’ and ‘natural’ substances invite moral hazards?

Inversions of purity, and the threat of paranoia in governing mundane artefacts

Cricket, like most sport, enervates with patterned, rhythmic, and repetitive rituals. Even the polishing of the ball between deliveries has a quasi-ceremonial quality, with one player usually assigned primary responsibility for the task. Reassuring habits, soothing superstitions, and tics of technique are also plainly evident in players’ disposition and comportment. Sporting contests thus present settings in which supposed ‘rational’ notions of ‘cleanness’ are revealed as no less ‘primitive’ than what we attribute to other folk groups (Douglas, 2003, p.33). Consider, for example, tennis players who avoid walking on court lines between points. Put differently, there are distinct forms of ‘body praxis’ (Jackson, 1983) that reinforce
ideals of ‘good play’, regardless of whether the actors involved can articulate why this is the case. A tacit but shared schema of bodily conduct is adhered to (consciously or otherwise), with any divergences likely to induce suspicion (especially when in possession of the ball).

Any variation from usual ritual and division of labour may therefore raise concerns. Changes in who is polishing the ball, unusual movement of fingers, hands diving in and out of pockets, or even precisely where on the body the ball is rubbed, any of these small shifts can indicate subterfuge. They are the ‘ambiguous and anomalous events’ that signal the presence of dirt (Douglas, 2003, p.40). Such threatening anomalies includes the agency of the ball itself, which must be made accountable for its actions (Woolgar & Neyland, 2013, pp.30-34). If, suddenly, the ball swings wildly after previously being inert, the umpires will pay especially close attention and conduct further inspections. The ball thus becomes a hermeneutical puzzle, where umpires translate its marks, parsing what is the result of normal play and what is illicit graffiti. Controversially, the Pakistan team were charged with ball tampering based on nothing but the suspicion that they could not have achieved reverse swing so quickly without using dishonest means (Fraser, 1993, pp.212-213). As Fraser observes, underlying frequent accusations against the Pakistan team was ‘evidence of a much more traditional and common discourse of racial, ethnic, religious prejudice and hatred’.

The cricket field can thus become subject to prejudices, anxieties, and fears of contamination that surpass almost any other social arena. In combining the conceptual hooks of Douglas’ ‘matter out of place’ with Neyland and Woolgar’s ‘mundane governance’, we can observe within professional cricket an abundance of ironic inversions of purity, and the increasing requirement for paranoid and hyper-vigilant surveillance of normally banal artefacts. The following examples render this abundantly clear.

To begin, saliva and sweat are typically taboo fluids regarding contact with other objects and persons (Douglas, 2003, pp.11, 52-53, 106, 121-123). This holds true across many cultural contexts, serving underlying functional purposes of ensuring hygiene against communicable disease or other threats to health and wellbeing. However, within the bounds of the cricket field, saliva and sweat, ironically, are the only sufficiently ‘pure’ substances that can interact with the ball. Indeed, saliva and sweat are not merely tolerated but encouraged as permissible interactants, for their strategic affordances enhance the overall spectacle. Saliva and sweat thus offer a form of manageable ‘disorder’ that ‘also provides the material of pattern’, altogether generating a ‘potentiality’ worth abiding (p.95). Put differently, their accepted use represents an ‘accomplished ontology’ (Neyland and Woolgar, 2013, p.51), for it is conceded that such tampering contributes to a fairer contest and lively spectacle. Still, there is great irony that this enhancement of purity arises in unhygienic forms, creating ‘a strange workplace where colleagues jointly spit on a common object’ (Lemon, 2016).

However, for less permissible forms of tampering, while ironic inversions remain, they are of a different kind. That is, the most common illicit ball tampering agents normally serve a restorative function. In the presence of a cricket ball, though, they signify pernicious threat. Sandpaper, for example, can provide a smooth finish to objects, improving their aesthetic form and functional utility. Indeed, many batsmen use sandpaper on their willow bats. However, as already observed, sandpaper can be used to roughen a ball, degrading its form and rendering its flight less predictable. While sandpaper signifies purity within the kit bag,
once it enters the field of play it immediately becomes a foreign article of threat, with no plausible explanation for its presence.

**Vaseline** (petroleum jelly) has traditionally been used as a kind of all-purpose curative. Alternatively, in cricket, Vaseline can generate shine beyond what is possible with saliva or sweat, and is therefore deemed *artificial* and *illicit*. One case of tampering-by-Vaseline was committed by the England team during the 1976-77 season, while on tour in India. Two English fast bowlers were having difficulties with sweat running into their eyes, and so applied gauze laden with Vaseline to their brows. However, because this same sweat – now infused with Vaseline – was used to shine the ball, an infringement was technically committed, and the Indian side complained vociferously. Indeed, the Indian cricket board even sent the ball and pieces of the gauze to the Tamil Nadu Forensic Science and Chemical Laboratory, for analysis and confirmation of *dirt* (Selvey, 2008). This began an edging towards scientization and the forensic gaze that governing bodies have largely tried to avoid, for reasons of both practical administration and further erosion of ‘the spirit of the game’.

Similarly to Vaseline, *hair gel, wax, lip balm, sun block* and other analogous substances are usually associated with enhancing beauty and vitality. Yet, on the cricket field, they become potential tampering agents, also often concealed by masquerading as sweat. The player, for instance, wipes sweat from his/her sunblock-laden brow, or runs fingers through gelled hair, and then proceeds to polish the ball. This creates the intriguing expectation that the ball may only encounter the *right kind of sweat*, earned through labour and unadulterated by ‘profane’ matter.

Parallel logics apply for *saliva*, with some forms thought *pure* and others *tainted*. In this case, the impurity of choice is *sugar*, widely thought to impart greater shine on the ball (though no empirical evidence yet exists regarding effects on swing). Hence mints, chewing gum, cough lozenges – normally used for everyday virtues of fresh breath, soothing sore throats, or simply a pleasurable hit of glucose – suddenly become *taboo* concoctions. Several high-profile players have been charged with tampering for having sugary substances in their mouth from which saliva was drawn to polish the ball. The wider cricketing community, however, generally does not see this as a serious offence, with formal sanctions often met with bemusement (Lemon, 2016). The distinction, it seems, is that this amalgam of the biological and chemical is thought permissible, as it is enacted *within* the organism and emergent from an act of *habit*, thus taking on a ‘natural’ quality. Evidence of this within-organism rationale is evident in one of the first charges of sugar-based tampering, when Rahul Dravid was sanctioned after *directly* rubbing a cough lozenge on the ball (Rasool, 2018). In this manner, the enforcement of sugar-based tampering is usually limited to obvious infringements (discussed further below). Some Indian cricketers even conducted a ‘covert mission’ to determine the candy best suited to polishing and ‘loading’, concluding that the caramel toffee *Alpenliebe* was ideal (Sundaresan, 2016). The England team, meanwhile, have preferred *Murray Mints* for polishing purposes (Pandaram, 2008).

Other tampering agents are far less common, and met with much firmer judgment. Nonetheless, these agents remain ironic inversions of purity. *Strapping tape*, for example, while ostensibly serving reparative purposes, can become adornments of suspicion, as the abrasive material – the strapping itself, or objects hidden within it – can damage the ball. Indeed, prior to Cameron Bancroft being caught, his vice-captain David Warner was initially
the main suspect under surveillance, thought to be using hand strapping to degrade the ball. Indeed, some claim Warner was aware of increasing surveillance, for after close scrutiny during a match, Warner added the names of his wife and children to his strapping as ‘a possible wink to the broadcasters that he knew what they were up to’ (Monga, 2018).

_Bottle caps_ seal beverages for freshness, but can also be used to scratch and tear stitches. Both Pakistan and New Zealand players have confessed to using this technique (Pringle, 2018). Employed for similar purposes are _long fingernails and teeth_, for these keratin and enamel signifiers of health can deftly tear at stitches. _Shoe spikes_, worn to ensure sound footing, can also inflict significant damage if a player ‘accidentally’ treads on the ball. Such circumstances present for umpires difficult interpretations of the _intention to tamper_. Even the humble clothes _zipper_, serving an obvious and mundane functional purpose, is now expressly forbidden for professional cricketers (ESPN, 2013). This prohibition was mandated after South African player Faf du Plessis was caught attempting to damage the ball with his pocket zipper.

Many other examples can be noted. Finally, however, in perhaps the single example of tampering that is _not_ an ironic inversion of purity – but ironic in its own way – literal _dirt in itself_ can also become symbolic _dirt_. The most well-known precedent involves former England captain Michael Atherton, who once hid dirt in his pocket, which he then covertly retrieved to rub over the ball (Fraser, 2005, pp.227-233). Atherton claimed he was using dirt not to damage the ball, but to keep his hands dry. This is a reasonable defence in some respects; to encourage swing the ball must remain dry, and rubbing dirt is unlikely to degrade it in any meaningful way. Hence, _players must also nullify themselves as a source of contamination_. Indeed, in more recent England teams sweat became something actively _avoided_. This was because sweat was thought less effective than sugary saliva, and so presence of the former would prevent the ball’s maximal absorption of the latter. This logic was taken to such lengths that certain players – known to be sweaty customers – were effectively barred from touching the ball, wherever possible.

Returning to Atherton’s defence, he argued the dirt was not to _accelerate_ the ball’s deterioration, but merely to _maintain_ it (Fraser, 2005, p.228). Still, if _rubbing the ball on the ground_ is not permitted – because the force of pressing and dragging can cause rapid degrading – should, inversely, _rubbing the ground on the ball_ be allowed? In any case, it appears that an overriding concern was of _hidden_ threat – i.e. an unknown substance in a pocket – that made it impossible to wholly excuse Atherton. Dirt, though a ‘natural’ substance, ontologically shifted into an ‘artificial’ agent once it sullied the pocket of a player’s ‘whites’, and then became outright _taboo_ when deliberately brought into contact with the ball.

Hence, in discussing literal dirt as contaminating _dirt_, not only does the field become a highly quarantined space where traffic of items is tightly regulated, but so is the _movement and intentions_ of players. For Atherton’s pocket dirt, his conduct was described by umpires as an ‘unfamiliar action’, and it was this unfamiliarity of movement that drew initial suspicions (p.228). Cameron Bancroft’s similar action of reaching into his pocket immediately before and after receiving the ball likewise signalled threat. Nothing may be hidden from view, at least not when the ball is in the vicinity. Do not be surprised, therefore, if even pockets are
eventually banished from cricketing attire. All these artefacts and more have become imbued with moral threat and hyper-vigilant surveillance.

Governing against the artificial, or governing for artifice?

Thankfully, professional cricket has not yet reached paranoid levels of scrutiny by requiring players empty their pockets before play. Again, such measures would undermine the game’s ‘spirit’ and mythos of its players as moral exemplars. Instead, what persists are curious ethical distinctions in how stakeholders define dirt. One important distinction, already implicitly addressed, is the difference between the foreign and the familiar. This rationale was especially prevalent in reactions to the Bancroft incident, with many insisting on the distinction between using artefacts already present on a field in an opportunistic, ready-to-hand manner, compared with smuggling objects for which no legitimate plausible function could be discerned (ABC, 2018b; BBC, 2018; Holmes, 2018). The Australian players involved were likewise acutely conscious of this important, albeit fuzzy, distinction. This awareness is revealed through the initial deception in their confession, substituting ‘tape’ and ‘dirt’ for sandpaper. Neither tape nor dirt are foreign objects within the cricket field, which perhaps gave the tampering an initial semblance of hasty opportunism, rather than cool premeditation. However, no such rationale presented itself when sandpaper was discovered to be the object of threat. This was always ‘matter out of place’.

Another important distinction in assessing severity and culpability concerns the difference between tampering that restores purity and tampering that hastens waste. That is, far more leniency is extended towards tampering actions that enhance the shiny side, rather than actions that worsen the rough side (Moonda, 2016). This is likely because polishing the shiny side effectively attempts to return the ball to its once pristine state. Accelerating the deterioration on the rough side, alternatively, is a wilful act of taking the ball further away from its original form, rendering it less trustworthy as an agent.

However, another elusive ethical demarcation reveals that the underlying politics of ball tampering, in practice, is less about policing the artificial, but rather governing for artifice. That is, as already noted, governing bodies want to avoid resorting to intense surveillance of subjects in ways thought unbefitting for the sport. Nor, however, do they want to encourage a free-for-all by allowing players to turn match balls into crater-filled asteroids. While reverse swing is a widely appreciated part of modern cricket, it cannot afford the reputational damage of players committing flagrant acts of deviance. Hence, governing for artifice becomes the default strategy; not policing against dirt to the greatest extent possible, but rather severely punishing players who fail to skilfully hide acts of tampering. This was implicitly admitted by International Cricket Council CEO David Richardson (2018):

‘You may not always get caught, we are not going to stop players chewing gum or from wearing sunscreen. There are many players who have chewed gum on the field throughout their careers and never once thought to use it on the ball, but if you are caught – and we have only caught players when it is pretty obvious what they are doing – then don’t complain, saying others do it is not a defence. You are cheating.’
One example of skilful evasion will illustrate this further. Recall that rubbing the ball on the ground is prohibited. However, fielding players will sometimes deliberately bounce their returned throws off the hard surface of the wicket, which conveniently accelerates ball deterioration. Umpires are then placed in the difficult position of assessing whether these scuffing throws were intentional. However, fielding players can perform a plausible artifice where necessary haste or brief lapse in skill results in scuffed returns. Curiously, Australian Rules Football is also characterized by this performative display of a lack of skill. For instance, players are not permitted to deliberately move the ball out of bounds (AFL, 2017, p.51). This can result in comical displays of artifice, where professional players – desperately wanting to get the ball out of bounds – will repeatedly fumble in ways entirely implausible with their ability, but nonetheless must be performed with due deferential ineptitude to avoid censure.

Returning to cricket, some cases of ball tampering reflect punishments administered due to naive lack of artifice. For example, South Africa captain Faf du Plessis was charged with tampering for having sugary substances in his mouth. In this case, du Plessis was sanctioned because footage showed him using saliva from his mouth in which a breath mint was also present. Some observers claimed the further incriminating factor was the effort du Plessis made to draw, using his finger, saliva from the very back of his mouth in which a ‘polluting’ object was present. This action suggested an intent to apply both sugary and comparatively viscous saliva, to better weaponise the ball for play. Pun aficionados, including du Plessis himself, couldn’t help themselves in suggesting the charge was ‘pure confection’ (Lemon, 2016) and had ‘taken the shine off’ an otherwise good performance (Reuters, 2016). In du Plessis’ case, the dirt was one of spatial proximity, for the ball and the breath mint were deemed to be brought into too close contact. In a similar incident, Sri Lankan Test captain Dinesh Chandimal was charged for the same offence. Here, however, the dirt was of temporal proximity, for ‘video evidence indicated […] he was taking sweets out from his left pocket, putting them in his mouth, before applying saliva to the ball within the space of a few seconds’ (CricInfo, 2018). Had Chandimal waited longer – perhaps until after the confectionary had dissolved – it is likely no charges would have been laid. This temporal proximity, it appears, is what imbued matter with instrumental threat.

Still, many players, such as du Plessis, have remained indignant, insisting that ‘It’s something that all cricketers do. Our mouths are always full of sugar, I think it’s such a grey area in the laws of cricket’ (Reuters, 2016). Steve Smith, the opposing captain, nonchalantly admitted as much, as had English and Indian players. Where lies the crucial distinction then, where one act signals naive dirt and another artful strategy? The prospect that policing a sport through which billions of dollars flows annually now requires making these determinations can present absurd dilemmas in mundane governance. Consequently, what was once the ‘spirit of the game’ transforms into administering the ‘explosion of categories’ (Neyland & Woolgar, 2013, p.2), which must be demarcated, inscribed, and then stringently observed within the security theatre of the field of play. Any proclamations of cricket’s unique moral standing – such as the Harris creed that opens this chapter – now read as comically hypocritical, particularly when elite representatives resort to almost childishly deviant tactics, such as switching out the match ball in an umpire’s coat pocket (Akhtar, 2011). Any attempts to correct breakdowns and reassert ‘the proper moral order of accountability’ (p.159) repeatedly fall short, for each new rule and every added layer of surveillance only further incentivises
forms of ‘edgework’ (Lyng, 1990) that offer tactical advantage in extremely competitive settings.

The ontological puzzle of defining ‘whatever means they have on their persons’

Several respected figures, recognising the risk of farce, have argued for relaxing anti-tampering rules. Former player Derek Pringle’s (2018) proposal is broadly representative of these views:

‘One simple way to stop the worst abuses is to allow bowlers to do what they like to the ball, using only what is available in the course of a day’s play. Fingernails, sun lotions and lip screens (from their skin only, not shirts or trousers impregnated with the stuff), sugary saliva […] hair gels, along with spit and sweat, would all be allowed. Outside agents, such as knives or bottle tops, would not...’

Richard Hadlee, one of New Zealand’s greatest players, echoed this view:

‘As long as the bowlers or fielders use whatever means they have on their persons, I don’t see anything wrong with it. I’m talking about the use of a finger nail to scratch the ball, not bottle tops or those sort of things.’ (Cameron, 1995)

Another former player, Geoff Lawson, likewise lobbied for ‘natural alterations’, to enable greater parity between bowler and batsman:

‘The argument is you should be able to do whatever you want with your fingernails […] because if the ball moves it’s much better for the game, because batsmen have now got this huge advantage […] Restrict it to natural alterations, but let’s do it.’ (Saltau & Barrett, 2012)

These ‘common sense’ suggestions reflect impatience with the descent into ‘ontological gerrymandering’ (Woolgar & Pawluch, 1985), particularly given that – to quote Ian Chappell – there is widespread consensus that swing bowling provides ‘aspects of the game that you must do everything to encourage’ (CricInfo, 2010). In short, many observers want to shift the prevailing ‘ontonorms’ (Mol, 2013) of tampering away from overbearing surveillance.

But still, we might also observe that these ‘simple way[s] to stop the worst abuses’ invite far more questions than they answer, displacing – but not resolving – threats of impurity by compelling us to (again) delineate ‘natural alterations’ and ‘fair’ bodily affordances. Pringle’s suggestion that permissible tampering agents can come ‘from their skin only’ reveals how the body effectively becomes a palette, from which various substances may be ‘painted’ onto the ball. How far are we willing to extend this body-as-palette? For example, baseball has long suffered with similar issues around tampering, with a common strategy being to smear pine tar somewhere inconspicuous on one’s skin, to later rub on the ball. Similarly, fingernails are, of course, a ‘means they have on their persons’, but would we want to encourage players to manicure little keratin blades to furiously work away at ball stitches? Would inspections need to be conducted before play to ensure fingernails fit the definition of only ‘natural alterations’?
This also raises the greater question of defining what, exactly, is ‘available in the course of a day’s play’, or what constitutes an ‘outside agent’. Attempting to codify this might invite even more ungovernable creative interpretation. Already, for example, many players wear zinc oxide-based sunscreens, distinctive for being a thick and opaque paste. Zinc is a heavy metal, and could therefore prove effective in ‘loading up’ the ball. However, players are careful to avoid this, for zinc oxide’s insolubility means it would likely stain the ball (thus inviting sanction). Former Australian player Jason Gillespie even noted that – despite being at high risk of developing skin cancer – he refrained from using zinc to avoid inadvertent tampering (Mirror, 2006). Given it would be preferable to not have players making decisions against their own health, should zinc – presuming it does not stain the ball – be permitted as a tampering agent?

We can even take Pringle’s proposal of ‘what is available in the course of a day's play’ much further. Most pomade hair products contain petroleum jelly. Similarly, olive oil is sometimes used for hair care; would this be permitted? Other hair products contain humectants, which can attract and retain moisture. Tar soap is a viscous substance also once used for hair care, could this be permissibly used to ‘load up’ a ball? What about alternatives to sun lotions, such as aloe vera or coconut oil? What if players elect to take the field with slow drying nail polish? Ultimately, will Pringle’s apparently ‘simple’ solution require players to submit personal hygiene products for prior approval, to ensure no unjust contamination?

This is before we even consider polishing agents sourced from the mouth. Sugary confections have long been a habitual part of cricket, and so arguably fit the definition of being ‘available in the course of a day's play’. But what if players press upon the bounds of this norm? It has been empirically proven that chewing gum increases saliva production and changes chemical compositions inside the mouth (Dawes & Kubieniec, 2004). Moreover, different ‘flavours’ of gum can have varying effects on salivary flow and pH levels (Karami-Nogourani et. al, 2011). With this considered, could professional teams legitimately employ laboratory expertise in determining precisely what edible substances are most conducive to producing swing? With so much at stake both financially and symbolically, competitors may find themselves in an absurd ‘space race’ involving mundane gastronomy and hygiene products. How are we to reconcile all this with Lord Harris’ claim that cricket is ‘more free from anything sordid’, when sordid scheming was behind one of its most innovative tactical developments? How does one protect cricket ‘from anything that would sully it’ when everything can be sullying matter?

Conclusion: Cleansing tears

This paper has explored the mundane governance of codifying and interpreting ball tampering in professional cricket. Such rule-making and application, in practice, necessitates drawing vague distinctions between ‘artificial’ and ‘natural’ matter. Moreover, due to the relatively ubiquitous and quotidian nature of the tampering artefacts used, suspicions regarding their presence risk descending into costly farce, with immense financial losses and reputational damage inflicted by the most seemingly innocuous of items. Ironically, these common tampering materials, which threaten the idealised moral ‘purity’ of cricket, are themselves normally associated with restoring purity. However, anti-tampering measures are
not employed to the fullest possible extent, for governing bodies are ultimately not governing against the artificial, but governing for artifice. That is, while authorities will not seek out evidence of tampering using all available means, if a player is wilfully deviant in ways impossible to ignore they will be publicly expunged as reputational dirt.

This was evident in the primary case study of this chapter, where an Australian player smuggled the ‘foreign’ matter of sandpaper onto the field for the purposes of ball tampering, causing extraordinary moral opprobrium (Wade, 2019). Reactions were swift, with lengthy suspensions of the players involved, the resignation of the coach, and a clearing out of the Cricket Australia executive. David Richardson (2018), CEO of the ICC, subsequently warned that ball tampering and sledging ‘threaten cricket’s DNA’, with harsher punishments introduced to deter such practices.

But such punitive measures may only serve to take the game further away from its moral ideals, under which players hold ultimate responsibility for upholding ‘the spirit of cricket’. As Richardson (2018) himself noted, ‘The spirit of cricket isn’t an historical hangover; it is part of the fabric of our sport. No other sport has codified the spirit so blatantly in its Laws, and we disregard it at our peril.’ He was thus cognizant of cricket losing its moral identity, reiterating that

‘…it will be the players who can safeguard the reputation of the game […] It is the nature of the players’ personalities, their strength of character that will ultimately define the spirit of the game and what it means in the 21st Century.’

The MCC likewise recognised these extraordinary circumstances as a time for ethical renewal and restoration of purity:

‘The time has come for a major shift in attitude and culture of all those with responsibility for leadership within the game, to give young players the kind of role models who will uphold standards, preserve cricket and, vitally, the Spirit of Cricket for future generations.’ (MCC, 2018a)

To this end of re-vitalising ‘the Spirit of Cricket’, it is not insignificant that one of the purifying, cleansing, restorative substances that Douglas (2003) highlights in Purity and Danger is tears. When elicited in response to emotional suffering, tears

‘ … are the stuff of romantic poetry: they do not defile. This is partly because tears are naturally pre-empted by the symbolism of washing. Tears are like rivers of moving water. They purify, cleanse, bathe the eyes, so how can they pollute? But more significantly tears are not related to the bodily functions of digestion or procreation.’ (p.126)

Tears are not sweat or saliva, nor are they adulterated with other substances discussed throughout this paper. Instead, tears arrive unbidden, as expressions of hurt, regret, and longing, while also signifying the possibility of starting anew. They can be revivifying, redeeming, confessional, unburdening, but sometimes also paralysing. Yet, also significant is their persuasive and performative function, evident through the stages upon which they appear.

Upon returning to Australia after a lengthy suspension was imposed, Steve Smith was immediately escorted into a press conference, delivering a full mea culpa through tears.
Cameron Bancroft and David Warner similarly broke down in intense confessional displays. The coach, Darren Lehmann – also through weary tears – soon after announced his resignation. The captain, vice-captain, coach, along with the most junior player in the team, were all purged in devastating fashion. Tears of regret, shame, and evident anguish were drawn and disseminated widely. Some hoped this would mark the start of cleansing impurities that had long festered within the Australian cricket, which had descended into wilfully ‘ugly’ tactics, all rationalised through fervent nationalism and hyper-masculinity (Wade, 2019). In turn, perhaps alternative modes of governing may be found, avoiding the creep of intensive surveillance and paranoid quarantine, which threaten to erode institutional standing by visibly undermining athletes so often held aloft as paragons of virtue.

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