

Did the Past Really Change in 2012?

TERENCE RAJIVAN EDWARD

The University of Manchester. School of Social Sciences
The University of Manchester. Manchester M13 9PL. United Kingdom
t.r.edward@manchester.ac.uk

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ABSTRACT: There is an intuition that the past does not ever change. In their paper ‘The puzzle of the changing past’, Luca Barlassina and Fabio Del Prete argue that in 2012 the past changed. I show that we are not in a position to accept their argument.

KEYWORDS: Change – competent authority – past – winner.

In a recent paper entitled ‘The puzzle of the changing past’, Luca Barlassina and Fabio Del Prete reject the impression that the past cannot change (Barlassina – Del Prete 2015). Lance Armstrong was declared the winner of the Tour de France cycling race on 23rd July 2000 by *Union du Cyclisme International* (UCI). On 22nd October 2012, UCI withdrew all of Armstrong’s Tour de France wins, because they found out that he had made use of banned substances while competing. Barlassina and Del Prete believe that this withdrawal changed the past. It was once true that Armstrong won the Tour de France, because of what UCI declared on 23rd July 2000, but the withdrawal means that from 22nd October 2012 it is false that Armstrong won the Tour de France. Barlassina and Del Prete portray an aspect of the past, who won the Tour de France, as determined by an authority in such a way that a declaration years later changed the past. However, there is an objection to their view and their attempt to reject this objection is at present inadequately justified.

The objection I have in mind is that Armstrong was never the winner, whatever UCI might once have declared, because he cheated by using banned substances. Barlassina and Del Prete respond as follows:

This objection rests on a confusion, by which the property *being the winner* is conflated with the property *being the person who deserves to win*. True enough, one cannot enjoy the latter property if one cheated; however, one can enjoy the former even if one cheated, since the possession of the property of *being the winner* is determined solely by a declaration of a competent authority, and a competent authority may, for one reason or another, declare a cheater a winner. (Barlassina – Del Prete 2015, 62)

In order to support this point, they appeal to a case from another sport: football (soccer). The 1986 World Cup match between Argentina and England was won by Argentina, who scored two goals to England's one, but one of Argentina's goals was scored by violating a rule. Diego Maradona scored a goal with his hand. The referee did not see this, we are told. Since Maradona's rule violation was intentional, Argentina won despite cheating. This is meant to show that the property of being the winner is determined solely by a declaration of a competent authority (cf. Barlassina – Del Prete 2015, 62).

I will identify three obstacles to endorsing this rejection of the objection. By 'obstacles', I mean things that Barlassina and Del Prete, or someone else, must do before we are in a position to endorse this rejection. The obstacles are in italics below. Note that in this paper, I use 'determine' in the following sense: for X to determine that Armstrong is the winner is for X to make it the case that Armstrong is the winner. There is another sense of 'determine' in which if something determines who the winner is, then it provides a good means of finding out who the winner is.

1. Barlassina and Del Prete do not define 'competent authority'. They put considerable effort into being precise regarding other points within their article, but regarding this matter the reader is left to guess the meaning from the two sporting examples. *However, we require a clarification before we can endorse their response to the objection.*

There are two reasons why we require a clarification. One reason is that it is unclear how exactly we are to understand the term 'competent author-

ity'. I suspect that a football referee can be very bad at their job and still count as a competent authority for Barlassina and Del Prete. I wonder if the referee can even act on a bribe and be counted as a competent authority, as they are using the term. If so, their use of the word 'competent' is potentially misleading.

Another reason why we require a clarification is this: there is a way of understanding what a competent authority is for Barlassina and Del Prete which leads to a regress. What determines who the Tour de France winner is for them? It is the competent authority on who the winner is which determines this. But what determines who the competent authority is? What determines that it is UCI? Is it some other authority, an authority on who the competent authority is regarding the Tour de France winner? If so, what determines who that other authority is? Is it yet another authority? There is a danger of a regress: a regress of background authorities. Barlassina and Del Prete need to either clarify what a competent authority is in a way that avoids this regress or else acknowledge the regress and explain why it is not a vicious regress.

2. In order to support their view that it was once true to say that Armstrong won the Tour de France, Barlassina and Del Prete appeal to the case of Argentina's victory over England in the 1986 World Cup. Barlassina and Del Prete think that on the basis of this World Cup case, we should agree that being a winner is determined by the declaration of a competent authority (Barlassina – Del Prete 2015, 62). For convenience of expression, I will often omit the declaration element when evaluating this view below.

Barlassina and Del Prete appear to make the following argument: if the winner of one particular competition is/was determined by a competent authority, then the winner of any competition is determined by a competent authority; there is one particular competition in which the winner was determined by a competent authority; therefore the winner of any competition is determined by a competent authority. This argument can be disputed by presenting a single example in which it does not seem as if the winner is determined by an authority. If the impression is correct, then the argument must have gone wrong somewhere. (And since the first premise is an assumption, rather than something argued for, Barlassina and Del Prete are not in a strong position to insist that their conclusion applies to a proposed example.)

Consider the following situation, which was possible once upon a time. Bobby Fischer and Boris Spassky agree with a certain chess authority to play a chess match. Fischer demands that the match be played behind closed doors, with no cameras present and no witnesses other than the players and members of the authority. Fischer wins by checkmate. But the authority decides to teach Fischer a lesson for being so demanding and it declares that Fischer lost. Fischer protests to the world at large. It seems to me that in this hypothetical situation, Fischer is still the winner, even if he cannot prove it. Maybe it will be said that in this situation, the chess authority does not count as competent. But even if the chess authority had spoken honestly, I do not see why that would change what determines the winner, i.e. what makes it the case that Fischer is the winner. Why would it not be the same thing that determines that Fischer is the winner either way – in short, the fact that he checkmated Spassky? If it is, then Barlassina and Del Prete's argument must have gone wrong somewhere. *They need to counter this challenge.*

3. In some competitions, perhaps in all competitions, the rules specify the conditions that need to be met in order to be the winner. If there were no such specification, how would competitors know what to do? The rules of a race say that the winner is the person who meets certain conditions. Those conditions might not include or entail that the winner is whoever some authority declares to be the winner. For example, the rules might specify that the winner is the competitor who has not taken certain substances and has finished ahead of all other competitors who have not taken such substances. If the rules specify this, then there is potentially a clash between who the rules entail is the winner versus who the winner is according to the 'competent' authority. Barlassina and Del Prete say that the objection we are considering is based on confusing who deserved to win with who won, but this is not necessarily true. If the rules of the Tour de France specify that the winner is the person who meets conditions X, Y and Z and Armstrong does not meet those conditions, even though he was once judged by the 'competent' authority to meet those conditions, then the objector may appeal to the rules as determining who the winner really is. *Barlassina and Del Prete need to show that this appeal is mistaken.*

Note that it is not obvious that the winner, going by the rules, is always identical to the person who deserves to win. If you play an opponent in

a one-on-one competition and they are expected to win, with good reason, yet they suffer an unlucky injury, forcing them to resign, do you deserve to win? Presumably, some people will say, 'Yes,' while others will say, 'No, you were just lucky.'

References

- BARLASSINA, L. – DEL PRETE, F. (2015): The Puzzle of the Changing Past. *Analysis* 75, No. 1, 59-67.