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WHO WAS THE BETTER ATHLETE? WHICH WAS THE BETTER TEAM?

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ABSTRACT

Often, there is disagreement about who is the better athlete, or the better team. The aim of this paper is to clarify a recent disagreement between the author (Mika Hämmäläinen) and Arvi Pakaslahti about different views of ‘betterness’ in sport competitions. I introduced a ‘three criteria’ model of betterness, which suggested the following three criteria: the official result, the ideally adjudicated result and the display of athletic skills. Pakaslahti criticised my account and introduced his own model, which has two built-in ideals of sport competitions: the Athletic Superiority Ideal and the Just Results Ideal. I argue that when we look behind the terminological differences, there is surprisingly little genuine disagreement between my account and Pakaslahti’s.

Keywords: philosophy of sport; betterness in sport; athletic superiority

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INTRODUCTION

In a recent philosophical debate, two views related to betterness in sport competitions have arisen: my stance and that of Arvi Pakaslahti. I introduced the ‘three-criteria’¹ model of athletic superiority (Hämäläinen, 2014). I also argued that this is a more fruitful stance compared to Nicholas Dixon’s (1999) one-criterion view in Dixon’s article *On Winning and Athletic Superiority*. Later, I further developed and improved my model (Hämäläinen, 2015). Pakaslahti (2016) criticised my model and offered two ideals to replace it: the Athletic Superiority Ideal and the Just Results Ideal.

The purpose of my model and Pakaslahti’s model is the same: to analyse competitions that, for many people, arouse a feeling that the wrong athlete or team may have won. A typical instance of such a scenario is when the better team or athlete does not win.

¹ Originally, I used the term standard instead of criterion, but the term criterion seems to be easier to grasp.

Pakaslahti agrees with me that refereeing errors, cheating, bad luck and gamesmanship, factors named by Dixon (1999), can cause competitions which failed to determine the better team or athlete in a specific competition. Let us look at Dixon's example of refereeing errors. The example is a football match in which the away team is dominating the match. It is constantly on attack and scores three good goals. However, the referee disallows all of them because he thought they were offside (although they were not). In addition, the referee erroneously awards a penalty to the home team. The home team scores and wins the match 1–0 (Dixon, 1999, p. 11).

Pakaslahti apparently agrees with me that a wrong team may have won in Dixon's example. However, our analyses of the situation seem to differ. I explain this case – and other situations where the better team or athlete may not have won – by referring to a conflict between the three criteria of my model. Pakaslahti, on the other hand, proposes that either the Athletic Superiority Ideal or the Just Results Ideal (or both, as in Dixon's example²) were not met in this kind of case.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that, despite initial disagreement, my view and Pakaslahti's view are very close to each other. I begin by introducing and elaborating my model. I also describe what kind of details or nuances Pakaslahti's article adds to it. Then, I introduce Pakaslahti's explanation and discuss how my basic idea is reborn in Pakaslahti's explanation. I conclude that a feeling about wrong winner can be explained by referring to conflicting items.

The 'three criteria'

I argue that betterness refers to the hierarchical order of units that we are considering. In sport, these units are athletes or teams, and there are three criteria (or standards) to establish their order (Hämäläinen, 2014, p. 291; Hämäläinen, 2015, p. 15). As Pakaslahti notes, I have not sustained a fixed terminology for these criteria. Originally, I introduced the terms (1) the achievement of a better formal result than one's opponent, (2) the superior ability to meet prelusory goals using lusory means and (3) the demonstration of superior athletic skill (Hämäläinen, 2014, p. 291). Later, I used the terms (1) official result, (2) ideally adjudicated result and (3) display of athletic skills (Hämäläinen, 2015, pp. 15–19). I will mainly use the latter terminology for the criteria in this paper. Pakaslahti however, prefers my original terminology because he regards them as more plausible (Pakaslahti, 2016, p. 292, note 11). I will address Pakaslahti's concern about the terminology when I elaborate the criteria of an ideally adjudicated result.

Official result

An official result of a sport competition is a number accompanied by a unit of measurement: *9.58 seconds*, for example, is an official result (Hämäläinen, 2014, p. 292; 2015, p. 17). Sport officials and organisations control official results and assign them to athletic performances. In the men's 100-metre final in the 2009 Berlin World Championships,

² Pakaslahti does not analyse Dixon's example in his article. Therefore, this suggestion is my interpretation how to use Pakaslahti's explanation to analyse Dixon's example.

Usain Bolt's official result was *9.58 seconds*. In theoretical terms, the official result expresses how many units of a related quality the officials of the sport attributed to an athletic performance. For example, the unit *second*, in the official result of *9.58 seconds*, is related to the quality *time*. Thus, Bolt's official result of 9.58 seconds implicates that the sport officials attributed 9.58 seconds of time to his athletic performance.

Ideally-adjudicated result split into two criteria

An ideally adjudicated result is a number accompanied by the unit of measurement, like the official result (Hämäläinen, 2015, pp. 17–18). However, an ideally adjudicated result differs from the official result in the sense that the ideally adjudicated result expresses how many units of a related quality the officials of the sport *should have attributed* to athletic performance according to the rules of the sport. For example, consider the three goals that the referee erroneously disallowed from the away football team in Dixon's example. The official result of the away team is thus 0 goals, but its ideally adjudicated result should be 3 goals.

Pakaslahti proposes that there is a substantial difference between my earlier term, 'meeting a prelusory goal by lusory means', and the new term, 'ideally adjudicated result' (Pakaslahti, 2016, p. 292, note 10). In other words, the difference is not merely terminological, but also concerns the content. Pakaslahti does not identify the difference but he is right that there is a difference. Let us first look at how I define the original term. Roughly, the criteria of meeting a prelusory goal using lusory means refers to achieving a specific state of affairs by using only those means that are allowed by the rules (Hämäläinen, 2014, pp. 291–292; Hämäläinen, 2015, pp. 15–18; see also Suits, 2010, pp. 25–26, p. 28). For instance, in a 5,000-metre race, running the distance of 5,000 metres faster than other competitors is the specific state of affairs. The means allowed by the rules say, amongst other things, that you should try to be faster than others without tripping any participants.

It seems that an *ideally adjudicated result* refers to a number accompanied by the unit of measurement, but *meeting a prelusory goal by lusory means* refers to a *comparison* between the numbers.³ For instance, the away team's *ideally adjudicated result* in Dixon's example is *3 goals*. Instead, saying that the away team *met the prelusory goal by using lusory means* refers to *the comparison* that the away team would have had more goals than the home team according to a correct application of the rule.

By introducing the new term, 'ideally adjudicated result', I made the three criteria of betterness more uniform, because the two other criteria also express a number or value. The new term is also easier to understand. Pakaslahti, however, is not satisfied with the new term. He writes that the criterion of ideally adjudicated result faces certain problems that the criterion 'meeting a prelusory goal by lusory means' does not have (Pakaslahti, 2016, p. 292, note 10).

Pakaslahti argues that the criterion of ideally adjudicated result does not take into account the ethos of the sport (Pakaslahti, 2016, pp. 288–290). This criticism is based on the distinction between two kinds of sport rules: written rules and ethos rules (see

³ An alternative interpretation would be that *meeting prelusory goal by lusory means* focuses on the process by which the number was generated.

D'Agostino, 1981). Written rules are found in the rulebook and they are governed by some organisation and its procedures. One can learn written rules by reading the rule book. Ethos rules, instead, are a shared agreement, convention or practice about what is permissible and impermissible in the sport. Learning ethos rules often involves participating in the particular sport practice or following it closely.⁴

The written rules and ethos rules greatly overlap but may also have some differences. The ethos rules typically include numerous written rules and perhaps some additional rules not mentioned in the rulebook. For instance, the ethos rules of football include the 'help for the injured player' rule, or the 'voluntary suspension of play' (VSP), as referred to in the philosophical literature earlier (see Hardman, 2009; Mumford, 2010). The written rules do not identify a VSP rule. According to the VSP, a football player should kick the ball out of play if there is an injured player on the field. The game action is suspended when the ball goes out of play and medical personnel can come to treat the injured player. The play continues with a throw-in by the team that did not kick the ball out. However, after the throw-in, the throwing team should return the ball to the team that kicked the ball out (see Pakaslahti, 2016, pp. 288–290; Simon, 2014).

Pakaslahti describes a football match in which two players from Team A, Player Q and Player R, exploit the disparity between written rules and ethos rules. Team B is attacking at the very end of the game, when a Player P of team A is injured. Consequently, a player from team B kicks the ball out of play. After the injured player is treated, however, team A does not return the ball to team B: Player Q throws the ball to his teammate R, who breaks through the defence of team B and scores (Pakaslahti, 2016, p. 285, p. 289; see also Simon, 2014)⁵. I assume that no other goals were scored in that match.

The official result of team A is 1 goal, but what is the ideally adjudicated result? In other words, how many goals should be attributed to team A, according to the rules of the sport? According to the written rules, the ideally adjudicated result is 1 goal. In contrast, according to the ethos rules, the ideally adjudicated result is 0 goals. Pakaslahti (2016, pp. 288–290) assumes that I refer to the written rules. His interpretation could be supported by stating that referees should usually ground their decisions on written rules, not on ethos rules. Therefore, it seems that an ideally adjudicated result cannot be based on ethos rules. If Pakaslahti's interpretation is right, my model seems to miss the ethos aspect of sports.

There are two possible ways to answer to Pakaslahti's critique.⁶ The first way is to rename the ideally adjudicated result and revise the description of this criterion so that both understandings of the rules are possible. We could speak about a 'rule-based result' instead of an ideally adjudicated result. The rule-based result refers to the number accompanied by the unit of measurement and tells us which number, accompanied by unit of measurement, should reside with athletic performance according to the rules of the sport. If rules are understood as written rules, my model lacks the ability to

⁴ I am not strictly following D'Agostino's (1981) definition of ethos of games. I am rather trying to express the idea of the ethos of sport in structural, mechanical or systematic way.

⁵ Pakaslahti has three variations of football matches. Here, I refer to (what he calls) the Tight Football Match III.

⁶ Both of these solutions face certain problems, but I will not address the problems in this paper. Furthermore, these problems are not specific for my account, but concern also Pakaslahti's model.

directly explain what disturbs us when somebody breaks the ethos rules. But if rules are understood as ethos rules, then my model can directly capture the cases where ethos rules are violated.

The second way to answer to Pakaslahti's critique is to split the criteria of ideally adjudicated result into two criteria; one criterion comprises the result according to the written rules and the other refers to the result according to ethos rules. We can call these new criteria: 'written-rules-based result' and 'ethos-rules-based result'. The result based on written rules is a number accompanied by the unit of measurement. It tells us which number accompanied by the unit of measurement should reside with athletic performance according to the written rules of the sport. In Pakaslahti's example of the football match, the written-rules-based result is 1. The second part of the division, the result based on ethos rules, yields an ethos-rules-based result of 0 goals.

If we value simplicity, we should prefer the first option, that is, to continue using three criteria of betterness, since written rules and ethos rules seem to conflict rarely. However, this paper focuses on the nuances and details of sport competitions, not on simplicity. Therefore, I explore the consequences of choosing the latter option, splitting the criterion into two. This choice increases the total amount of my criteria to four. Next, I will introduce my last remaining criterion of betterness.

Display of athletic skills

'Display of athletic skills' refers to how much some particular athletic performance includes action elements that the sport community values (Hämäläinen, 2014, 2015). For instance, let us compare two different kinds of goals in football: a goal scored from a penalty shootout and Argentinian Maradona's second goal against England in the 1986 World Cup match. Maradona received the ball in Argentina's half. He dribbled around Englishmen all the way to England's goal and scored. Maradona's goal embodies actions that the football community values more than actions that are required to score a goal from a penalty shot.

Congruence between the criteria of betterness

I hold that a sport competition determined the better team or athlete in that competition if there was congruence between the three criteria (Hämäläinen, 2014, p. 290; 2015, p. 19). Respectively, the competition failed to determine the better athlete or team if there was a conflict between any of the criteria. After splitting the ideally adjudicated result into two criteria, the requirement for determining the better team or athlete has risen to congruence between the four criteria. To illustrate a competition that failed to determine the better team, we can consider Dixon's example of refereeing errors. The home team achieved a better official result (1 goal). However, the away team achieved the better written-rules-based result (3 goals), the better ethos-rules-based result (3 goals) and displayed more athletic skills (it was dominating and attacking dangerously). Thus, the official result conflicted with all the other criteria, and the competition failed to determine the better team in that match.

Pakaslahti: two ideals

According to Pakaslahti (2016, pp. 281–282), there are two built-in ideals or goals for every sport competition: the Athletic Superiority Ideal and the Just Results Ideal.

Athletic Superiority Ideal

Pakaslahti (2016, pp. 281–282) states that the Athletic Superiority Ideal is met if the competition provides an official result which reflects accurately the betterness of different athletes or teams in that contest. For instance, if A beat B in a sport contest, even though B was better, the Athletic Superiority Ideal is not met. According to Pakaslahti, betterness is connected to athletic excellence, which he considers as ‘the correct criterion of betterness in sport’ (Pakaslahti, 2016, pp. 289–290). Thus, if B was better than A in a sport competition, then B demonstrated athletic excellence over A.

Pakaslahti proposes that athletic excellence is a broader notion than athletic skills. Athletic excellence is about athletic abilities, not merely about athletic skills. He describes a boxing match between Boxer A, who ‘demonstrates superior technique, speed and agility’ and the opponent, Boxer B, ‘who is much bigger and has a much longer reach than Boxer A’. Boxer B wins the match easily. Pakaslahti suggests that Boxer A displayed more athletic skills whereas Boxer B demonstrated more athletic abilities as a whole (Pakaslahti, 2016, pp. 289–290). However, there is a problem in Pakaslahti’s explanation of athletic abilities.

It seems that athletic skills defined by me and athletic excellence introduced by Pakaslahti refer to the same phenomenon. Let us look more closely at the example of the boxing match. If athletic abilities were determined only by Boxer B’s bigger size and longer reach, the boxing match between them would appear to be futile. We could simply view their physical attributes and say that Boxer B is better than Boxer A, without having a match between them. Even supposing Boxer A managed to beat Boxer B, Boxer B would still be deemed as better than Boxer A according to this view. Obviously, Pakaslahti does not support this kind of view. It seems that Pakaslahti intended to suggest that Boxer B demonstrated more athletic excellence because Boxer B was stronger and absorbed the hits of his opponent, which was due to Boxer B’s physical attributes, size and reach. Seemingly, hitting powerfully and blocking punches are actions that the boxing community values. Remember, I define athletic skills as actions that the sport community values. Thus, Pakaslahti’s view of athletic excellence resonates with my view of athletic skills.⁷

The final note about the boxing match addresses a possible concern about conflicts in athletic skills. Some people may think that it was Boxer A who showed more athletic skills, not Boxer B as Pakaslahti claims. This kind of disagreement is not a threat for my view of athletic skills because I state that display of athletic skills depends on the valuations of the sport community, and among that community, different people may value the

⁷ Pakaslahti could have argued that my term athletic skills does not correspond to my definition of athletic skills and that I should use a more accurate term, namely athletic excellence. This is a more plausible argument than Pakaslahti’s attempt to separate athletic skills defined by me from athletic abilities described by him.

same actions to different degrees (see Hämäläinen, 2015, pp. 28–29). Some may value more agility and technique while some may value more strength. In other words, my criteria of athletic skills seem to capture the plurality of the real world.

It seems that the Athletic Superiority Ideal is a truncated version of my multiple-criterion model. The Athletic Superiority Ideal detaches two criteria from my model, official result and display of athletic skills, and proposes that we need congruence between these two criteria to determine betterness. Diagram 1 illustrates this connection between my criteria of betterness and Pakaslahti’s Athletic Superiority Ideal.

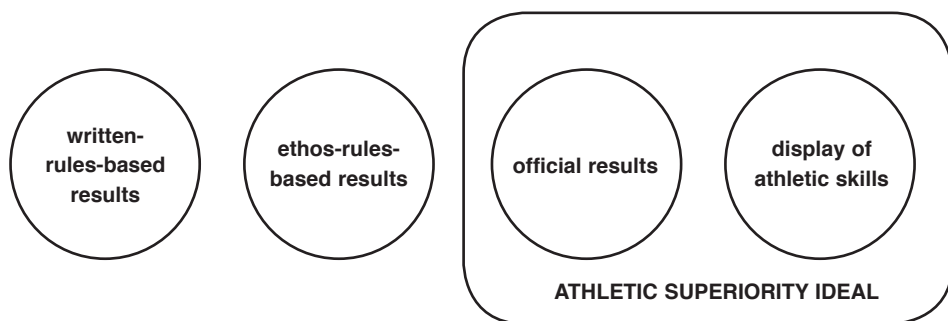


Diagram 1. The relation between my criteria of betterness in sport and Pakaslahti’s Athletic Superiority Ideal

Just Results Ideal

According to Pakaslahti (2016, pp. 282–283), the Just Results Ideal was achieved if the winner of the contest deserved the victory. Victory was deserved if it was determined by the rules and ethos of the sport: ‘I believe that whether some athlete or team deserved (or would have deserved) to win some sports contest is not always determined only by the rules of that contest. I think it is also determined by the ethos of the sport the contest represents’ (Pakaslahti, 2016, p. 288).

Pakaslahti describes a case in which the Just Results Ideal was not achieved: a football match between Team A and Team B. The match is tight. Both teams possess the ball 50 per cent of the time, have two corner kicks, and have two shots saved by their goalkeepers. However, there is one notable difference between their performances. Team A creates five good scoring opportunities in which the ball misses the goal by only half a metre while team B has two good scoring opportunities in which the shot goes four metres wide. The match is free of bad luck, refereeing errors, cheating or gamesmanship. In the last moments of the game, however, two players of Team A exploit the disparity between the written rules and ethos rules of football, as described earlier in this paper. The match is about to end soon and team B is attacking, when Player P from Team A gets injured. Consequently, a player of Team B kicks the ball out of the field according to the ethos rule, the voluntary suspension of play. However, after the throw in, Team A does not return the ball to Team B, but scores a goal and thus violates ethos

rules. The Team A wins the match 1–0 because of this goal (Pakaslahti, 2016, p. 285, pp. 288–289)⁸.

Pakaslahti states that the Just Results Ideal was not achieved in his example due to the violation of the ethos rules by team A: ‘Team A did not deserve to win because [...] they [two players of team A] violated a convention which is a fundamental part of the ethos of football’ (Pakaslahti, 2016, p. 289).

Pakaslahti (2016, p. 289) argues that the three-criterion model of athletic superiority cannot explain why the football match would be a failed athletic contest. He is right if the rules of sport are interpreted as written rules. However, the more nuanced version, the four criteria account, is able to explain Pakaslahti’s example by referring to a conflict between the criteria. Team A achieved the better official result (1 goal), the better written-rules-based result (1 goal) and displayed more athletic skills (it had better scoring opportunities). However, both teams achieved the same ethos-rules-based result (0 goals).

The Just Results Ideal appears to be a truncated version of the four-criterion account. The just result ideal detaches the official result, written-rules-based result and ethos-rules-based result and compares the three to see whether there is a conflict between them. Furthermore, when the written rules and the ethos rules are congruent, or their disparities do not cause decisive problems, the Just Results Ideal also represents the truncated version of the three-criterion model. Diagram 2 illustrates the connection between the criteria of betterness and the Just Results Ideal:

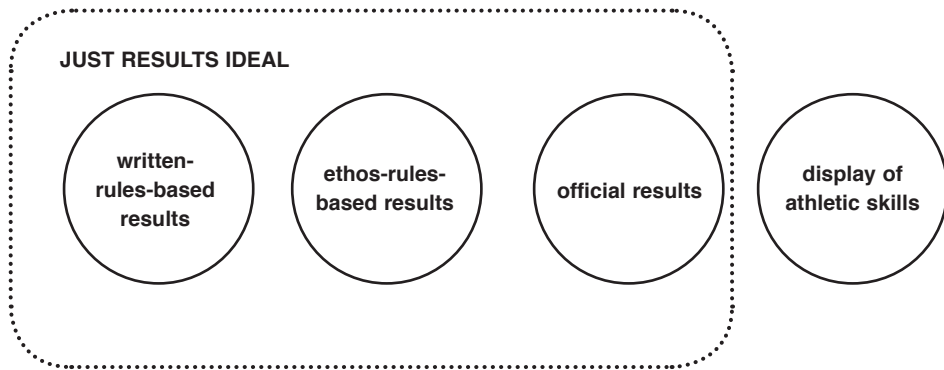


Diagram 2. Relation between my criteria of betterness in sport and Pakaslahti’s Just Results Ideal

CONCLUSION

I have analysed two different points of view related to betterness in sport competitions: my three criteria of betterness in sport and Arvi Pakaslahti’s two built-in ideals.

My view is comprised of three criteria: official result, ideally adjudicated result and display of athletic skills. On the basis of Pakaslahti’s critique, I have argued that, if our

⁸ I refer again to Pakaslahti’s Tight Football Match III.

goal is to explain the details and nuances of betterness in sport competitions, the ideally adjudicated result should be split into two criteria: written-rules-based result and into ethos-rules-based result. Consequently, the total number of criteria would rise to four. According to my multiple-criterion model, sport competition determines the better team or athlete if the criteria are congruous.

The two built-in ideals introduced by Pakaslahti are the Athletic Superiority Ideal and the Just Results Ideal. The Athletic Superiority Ideal claims that the better athlete or team was determined if the official result accurately reflected the relative betterness, that is athletic excellence, of the athletes or teams in that contest. The Athletic Superiority Ideal can be also expressed in my terminology: the better athlete or team was determined if the criteria of official result and athletic skills were congruous. Pakaslahti's second ideal, the Just Results Ideal, states that the team or player deserved victory if it was determined by the rules and ethos of the sport. Again, the Just Results Ideal can be expressed in my terminology: victory was deserved if the official result, written-rules-based result and ethos-rules-based result were congruous.

It seems that the two accounts, the four criteria of betterness and the two ideals, share the same underlying idea. They both test congruence for four items. I test congruity at once between the four items whereas Pakaslahti divides the testing into two segments. The item of official result is involved in both of these segments. Diagram 3 illustrates the underlying idea of the four shared items in my and Pakaslahti's views. Furthermore, when the written rules and ethos rules do not conflict decisively, the three-criterion version of betterness and the two built-in ideals share the same underlying idea.

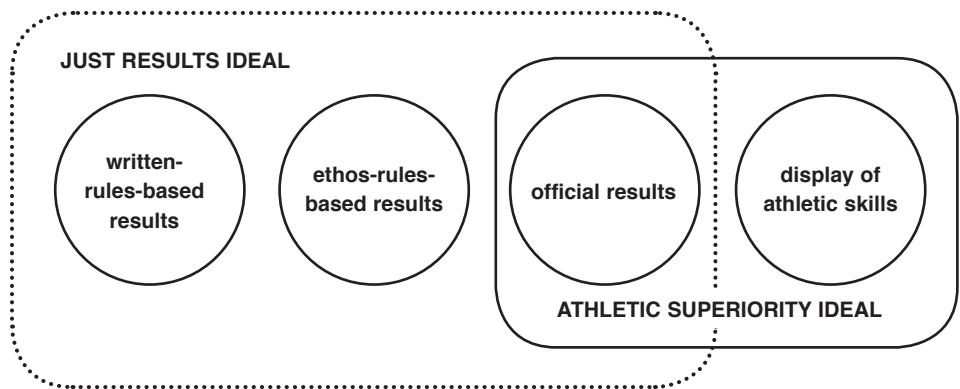


Diagram 3. Connections of my criteria of betterness in sport and Pakaslahti's two built-in ideals

The difference between my approach and Pakaslahti's approach to the four items appears to be partly caused by different terminological understanding. I understand betterness through all the four items. For Pakaslahti, betterness is only about two items: official result and athletic skills (or athletic excellence). Furthermore, Pakaslahti thinks that official result together with written-rules-based result and ethos-rules-based result are related to justness or deservingness (Pakaslahti, 2016, pp. 281–283, pp. 289–290).

To illustrate the conclusion about the items that may conflict, let us return to Dixon's example about the football match. In that match, the home team won 1–0, since

the referee erroneously disallowed three good goals from the away team and contributed to the home team's only goal by making a bad call. It follows that official result conflicted with other criteria (result based on written rules, result based on ethos rules and display of athletic skills). Pakaslahti accepts the conflict, but chops it into two parts (when expressed with my terminology). First, the official result conflicted with display of athletic skills. Second, the official result conflicted with result based on written rules and result based on ethos rules. Thus, there seems to be a considerable amount of agreement between me and Pakaslahti on the underlying level.

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