

Foreword to *The ethical coaches' handbook : a guide to developing ethical maturity in practice* [ISBN: 9781032230603] / edited By Wendy-Ann Smith, Jonathan Passmore, Eve Turner, Yi-Ling Lai, David Clutterbuck (Routledge, 2023).

Where does ethical coaching start?

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This book is about ethics in coaching. The title of the handbook implies that it will provide a guide to resolving in a right way complex ethical issues that are abundant in the multiple situations that arise in our work – easier said than done! Although there are ethical codes in all professions, they are not precise for a good reason and do not offer ready-made answers every time we face a dilemma or ethical concern. Furthermore, what is ‘right and wrong’ or ‘good and bad’, even in principle, are notoriously amongst the most difficult questions in philosophy. This means that to hope for clear and simple answers in applied practices is more than optimistic.

Why are decisions about ethical action so difficult? Because what is morally right or wrong is rarely a question that can be answered simply by rational analysis or empirical investigation. Although both are often useful to some extent, they can bring us to logical dead ends in many situations. These questions are so difficult because human beings frequently hold to system of values that may vary not only from culture to culture but often also from one individual to another. Although as human animals we are similar to each other in having certain basic needs and desires, and there are some moral imperatives that seem to apply to all of us, these often turn out to be general principles that tend to crumble in concrete situations when subjected to factual, cultural and subjective interpretation. This is why there are conflicting moral theories and general ethical principles, but these serve only as general guidance. At the point of application, they too often stumble on the personal values of those who are having to make the ethical decision. Even such an ‘obvious’ ethical principle as ‘do no harm’, for example, does not help definitively because it depends on how the individual evaluates ‘harm’ relative to the context in which it arises – it is far from always being obvious.

As an example, we can look at a psychological puzzle that thoughtful coaches often recognize in their work, and which clearly has ethical significance. On the one side, it goes without saying that coaches should not be involved in supporting the clients’ actions that might be unethical. This requires that we see clients as agents and recognise their autonomy. As such, we must hold them responsible for their action and be able to judge that action in ethical terms. On the other

side, with deeper understanding of the clients and knowing their circumstances we feel compassion for them. We know that individuals and their behaviours are affected by multiple forces in the complex dynamic systems within which they act with multiple commitments to the varying parts of these systems - all of which inevitably impose restrictions on their agentive autonomy. Perhaps because of this, coaches work so hard to avoid being judgmental. So, should we judge or not? Most likely it is our personal values that would determine our attitude to the client and our course of actions. It is also quite likely that often we are not even aware that we hold these important values simultaneously (e.g., autonomy and responsibilities of a human agent vs complex realities of life and compassion), but they clash in some situations involving ethical decision making.

In addition to personal doubts, often we also need to come to an agreement with others about ethical action. In such cases, the difficulties continue because our values may be only superficially compatible on the level of principles. In the concrete situations they might even be irreconcilable from the ‘spectator’s point of view’. This might be inviting a relativist worldview, that is to say, proclaiming that each person can decide what their values are and only need to be consistent to these values. Another relativistic attitude may be that values are different in each culture and we should not judge them as wrong simply from our cultural perspective, e.g., one person’s terrorist is another person’s freedom fighter. This can be seen as an interesting dilemma in theory, but in coaching we are not in a spectator’s position – we have to make decisions and act. It is not defensible being a relativist, respecting other people’s values and rights to act on them, when we are in a position to prevent the avoidable harmful consequences of these actions. There is surely a distinction to be made between respecting differences and having moral obligations.

You have probably noticed that so far, I have been using the terms ‘moral’ and ‘ethical’ interchangeably as there seem to be no watertight distinction between them. They are both about right and wrong in human action. The only difference that I see in the context of this book is that morality is concerned with *universal prescriptions* about the ways of being a good person. Any sincere moral judgment implies a command (*a prescription*), to anyone in similar circumstances (*universally*) to act in accordance with that judgment. Although, being something of an ‘idealist’, I am sympathetic towards any ambition to identify and agree upon imperatives that are universal, I see this as a task of enormous magnitude. At the same time, I am intensely worried when certain groups advocate their chosen imperatives and rules with a stringency bordering on fanaticism. Such moral rules are often a manifestation of the need to control others

by any cost. I also dislike psychological and behavioural consequences of moralism such as righteous anger, moralistic posturing and debilitating guilt.

Ethics, on the other hand, is generally expected to be a *reliable guide to life, as a practical philosophy* for an individual or a society (Marks, 2013). Although this also might sound like a universal intention, for it to be reliable and practical, ethical codes are usually developed with reference to a specific area of life and practice. I think this difference means that the enormity of realising moral ideals can be thought of as divided into sizable and manageable chunks in specific contexts. At the same time, in order for this to happen, important conditions should be in place. In this Foreword I want to explore these conditions for coaching practice and raise some questions that might have been skipped in our field in the haste of implementing the important task of ensuring that coaching is an ethical practice. If these questions are not addressed, we will continue to wobble when facing ethical dilemmas, puzzle over interpreting our codes of ethics, and struggle with making decisions in ethically difficult situations.

One of the important conditions for an ethical code to be viable for a particular group of people is that this group should share core values in relation to the area of life or work in question. However, this is only possible when that particular group has established that they have an agreed upon *common purpose*. With this purpose and these values, they are in a position to define common strategies – ethical codes of practice. This highlights the first major problem, as I see it, for ethical guidance in coaching. It is clearly connected to the uncertainty of what we hold as the purpose of coaching in organisations. We are not explicit about what coaching is for and we do not have a commonly held agreement about who we serve as coaches: individual clients or sponsoring organisations or other parties.

Let me demonstrate the difficulty caused by the absence of agreed purpose by one of the valuable Kantian moral imperatives: one should not treat others as the means to an end. I personally align myself with this intention (thus my lifetime crusade against manipulation) and I am sure it makes sense for any coach in spite of various philosophical issues (e.g., see Marks, 2013). This principle is based on the value of respect and preservation of human dignity. But let's see what emerges when we apply this imperative in the wider context of different stakeholders of coaching. If coaching is mainly a *performance-enhancing organisational intervention*, the organisation has a priority in terms of defining the goals of coaching, the need to monitor the process and often even specifies tools and interventions that the coach should use. Using this Kantian imperative, both the coach and the client in this case are used as means to the organisation's ends. However, if coaching takes individual *clients' priorities and interests*

as its end, it is the organisation and its financial investment in coaching that become means for the clients' and coach's ends. Therefore, if we do not have an agreed purpose of coaching amongst all those involved, this moral principle appears impotent.

Where we are now and what we do in practice amounts to manoeuvring around this issue in order to make coaching work, and that seems to involve trying to sit on more than one chair. Of course, a more difficult but honest way is not to give up in terms of establishing a common purpose of organisational coaching. Being on the same side with organisations in this pursuit is a long-term ambition, but I think we owe it at least to ourselves in the coaching world to bite the bullet and decide what coaching is for. I believe it is possible, but this is a topic for a different conversation. Meanwhile, one might say, our codes of ethics are there partially to counteract some of the issues that are created by this lack of clarity about our purpose.

It must be admitted that even without the above problems, creating codes of ethics is a challenge. There are no unified moral theories to guide our codes of ethics. This is why ethical codes contain information that sounds a little vague. They are developed with the recognition that it is difficult to ground ethics in moral theories when all of these theories are important and valuable in their own right. These theories (e.g., deontology, consequentialism, virtue ethics, contract theory, and so forth) are aiming for universal prescription based on rational argument. However, each of these theories, unsurprisingly, meets with well-justified objections in the philosophy of ethics, and in real situations they clash in the same way as our values also clash. In real situations we do not have the power to anticipate how they would unfold with a full score of who will benefit and who will be harmed. (Although some of us seem to be intent on playing God and offering specific '10 commandment'-type scenarios for coaches, I guess this can only be useful amongst those who already share the same purpose and moral theory). Therefore, codes are not precise things, but they should at least indicate a general intention towards negotiation between complex factors.

Let me show an example of what happens when we wish to demand more of our codes than core principles and general intention. Below are 2.4 and 2.8 from our Global Code of Ethics in coaching (GCoE, 2021, p. 4).

2.4

Members will use their professional knowledge and experience to understand their clients' and sponsors' expectations and reach agreement on how they plan to meet them. Members will also try to take into account the needs and expectations of other relevant parties.

Members should be guided by their client's interests and at the same time raise awareness and responsibility to safeguard that these interests do not harm those of sponsors, stakeholders, wider society, or the natural environment.

Although I can clearly see the high value of the intention behind this new clause 2.8 in the Global Code of Ethics and recognise how much effort has been put to carefully construct it, I am not sure about the practicality of this formulation. If we look first at clause 2.4 about contracting, we can see that it is less categorical - 'try[ing] to take into account the needs and expectations of other relevant parties'. In comparison, the style of 2.8 involves the terms such as 'responsibility' and 'safeguard' which in themselves require clarification. For example, it is not clear 'whose responsibility', 'what is the nature of the safeguard', etc. Even more difficult is to identify what it means ('do not harm') in principle and particularly in situations with multiple stakeholders. A simple example could be coaching clients in the organisations and businesses the activities of which are considered detrimental e.g., for the natural environment. Because of such confusion I doubt that this formulation is of great help to the admirable intention that motivates this clause.

In addition to highlighting these types of problems, I would like to raise in the Foreword to the book some specific questions in relation to ethics in general and for coaching in particular. I will also attempt to answer them in short, knowing that the rest of this impressive volume will be addressing these and many other questions in useful detail.

Can moral and ethical principles be universal for the whole of humanity?

This may sound as a too abstract question, but I think it highlights many issues that we have, not only in coaching, but also in the world. We are hugely divided. Therefore, I don't think such universality is possible at this stage, unless we, as the whole world population, identify a unified purpose and work to overcome differences in values that are connected to this purpose. There are some signs that issues with the environment might be able to unite us at some stage, but at the moment the discrepancies in preferences, even in evaluating this situation, are quite strong.

Is there any moral theory that is most applicable to coaching at this stage of development?

The theory that might be most helpful, as I see it, is that of moral particularism which has a close connection with philosophy of pragmatism. This theory recognises how difficult it is to apply moral principles to each morally challenging situation. So, it requires from us to explore

each situation in its context with consideration of as many potential consequences of an action as we can. Although this position is also not perfect, it is practical and in tune with the main ideals of coaching such as recognition of complexity and uncertainty, and the value of reflective exploration. Supervision is an invaluable setting for applying this position in coaching practice. I believe that the book you are about to read is a manifestation of moral particularism and pluralistic attitude to difficult issues. It takes the reader right to the specific contexts and typical difficulties that coaches face and explores these situations with determination and rigour.

What else would be required from coaches in line with moral particularism?

This question is the most important as it gives us an opportunity not only to explore multiple situations of ethical significance, but also to develop a general capacity for processing such situations whenever it is needed. With this purpose I am offering four areas for development of coaches with importance for ethical coaching practice. All four of these overlap in many important respects and are only separated for the purpose of punctuating the argument.

- Dealing with otherness
- Developing the self as an instrument of ethical practice
- Developing ethical maturity
- Developing trustworthiness

Dealing with otherness

In applied disciplines such as coaching, ethics is about relationship; about dealing with otherness. It is not a prescription about how to deal with diversity and inclusion, which is a wider agenda of many fields including coaching. It is about aiming for completeness in gaining an understanding of our practice and all its aspects. Aiming for completeness in understanding, we need to value as many sides and positions as possible, even if marginal. Only with this intention can we eventually establish a common purpose of coaching which would help in refining ethical codes.

Fair dealing with otherness also implies that we act as guardians of human rights in principle, aware of others' and our own needs and limitations. It implies transparency in our interactions with clients with an intention to prevent manipulation, however well-meaning its intended outcome might be. This has to be pursued at all stages of our work, starting from the point of attracting clients. It would involve providing them with information about your qualifications

and how your model of coaching works, as well as sharing your values and personal interests in the outcomes of your work with them.

Developing the self as an instrument of ethical practice

Within the context of moral particularism, the onus is on us as coaches as the main instrument of practice to explore each situation as thoroughly as possible, to examine our own values and what role they might have in the decision making in addition to guidance provided by the codes of ethics that are available to us. It is an ability to ask useful questions about ‘what is a better action?’, ‘who is affected?’, ‘what are the consequences?’, and so forth.

It is also important to continue to work towards a better understanding of oneself. Recognising your own complexity and the many potential clashes of values you might come up against, means that you need “to figure out what you really want, that is, the hierarchy of your desires all things considered, and then figure out how to achieve or acquire it by means that are themselves consonant with the prioritised set of your considered desires” (Marks, 2013, p. 86). Marks’s description of the essence of ethics is related to the big question of ‘how shall I live?’. But it is also really important how you see yourself as a practitioner and what your purpose is when you engage in this practice. It requires the same careful exploration of your model of practice and what you consider as ends and means in achieving your professional purpose. There are also two specific qualities that I would like to add with a view to making this section more practical in relation to ethics: ethical maturity and trustworthiness.

Developing ethical maturity

We have already discussed the complexity of ethical dilemmas in coaching, the limitations of codes and regulations and competing moral perspectives. These problems indicate a need for coaches of all genres and levels of experience to seek help with ethical issues in supervision and to continue developing their own ethical maturity. Ethical maturity implies an ability to explore complex situations closely and intently, but also without forming strong attachments to a particular outcome. It implies someone who is aware of the impossibility of ‘the view from nowhere’ and so welcomes ideas from all perspectives but also welcomes their critique. It implies growing out of defensiveness as an obstacle to understanding and growth.

Extending the idea of oneself as an instrument of practice, ethical maturity starts with oneself, with recognition of one’s own conflicting nature. It requires awareness that our own personal interests can create a tendency to simplify those issues that have ethical implications. Our own

tendencies for self-deception can hide from us the nuances that work against our personal interests (Bachkirova, 2015). At the same time, ethical maturity does not imply turning our back to our shadows. I cannot agree more with Mary Midgely, who said: “To deny one’s shadow is to lose solidity, to become something of a phantom. Self-deception about it may increase our confidence, but it surely threatens our wholeness” (Midgley, 1984, p. 13). I believe that when the shadow is befriended, it provides another string to the bow of ethical maturity.

Developing trustworthiness

Coaches know that the quality of our work with clients is in direct correlation with the trust that we are able to create with them. Onara O’Neill (2013) argues that trust between people requires an intelligent judgement of trustworthiness. So, if we want others’ trust there are two conditions. First, we have to be trustworthy, which requires competence, honesty and reliability. Second, we have to provide intelligible evidence that we are trustworthy, enabling others to judge intelligently where they should place or refuse their trust. I believe, that for our own moral guidance in the context of difficulties with universal moral norms, conflicting values, vague ethical codes, etc, O’Neill’s suggestion offers something very special.

For the first condition, it is paramount to keep asking ourselves when we are trustworthy and when not. For example, are we trustworthy if we claim to be experts in our work without proper education / training and continued professional development (CPD)? Are we trustworthy if we promise sponsors and clients too much, e.g., transformation as the result of each assignment? Are we trustworthy if we are not willing to expose our work to scrutiny in supervision? Asking these and other questions provides us with an opportunity to develop trustworthiness.

For the second condition - providing intelligible evidence that we are trustworthy, this book is not only a guide for coaches on how to think about ethics and become more trustworthy. It also shows to those we work with how serious we are, how carefully we consider the nuances of many situations and contexts, recognise the issues in the midst of external or internal nuances, explore the difficulties of ethical judgement and how motivated we are to develop ourselves as ethical instruments of practice. I hope this book can be one of the types of evidence for them to judge our trustworthiness.

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