Conference Paper
Enriching coaching ethics with philosophical ethics and interculturalism
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ABSTRACT: While recognizing that current coaching codes of ethics offer useful guidance, this article calls for a deeper ethical reflection in the face of planetary challenges. It advocates for the integration of philosophical ethics and interculturalism, encouraging coaches to challenge assumptions and broaden their perspectives. The exploration includes deontological and teleological ethical theories, referring notably to the pioneering contributions of Immanuel Kant, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and Aristotle. This article argues that coaching cannot be ethical without being engaged toward sustainable development (spelled out in the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals). Furthermore, it introduces intercultural coaching, proposing the Cultural Orientations Framework (COF) to navigate cultural variations, which are often ignored in current coaching ethics. Ultimately, it asserts that a comprehensive approach, incorporating diverse ethical perspectives and cultural considerations, and a commitment to sustainability, is crucial for ethical coaching in today’s complex and turbulent world.

Five Keywords: Coaching ethics, philosophical ethics, sustainability, Cultural Orientations Framework (COF), intercultural coaching

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Introduction

Leading coaching associations have contributed significantly to the professionalization of coaching through codes of ethics that have increased in sophistication over the years. These ethical codes are

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essential for the coaching profession which is still predominantly unregulated. Ethical codes typically serve as guidelines leaving coaches to exercise their judgment to determine what they should and should not do in any given situation.

We all have opinions about what is right and wrong, and we may be quick to judge. Referring to coaching codes of ethics and exercising careful consideration, help us feel confident that it will be enough to make the right decisions.

However, deeper awareness and reflection are called for to make informed ethical judgments and position ourselves amid some of the horrors we see in the world today (e.g., Hamas’s appalling barbarism, Russia’s tragic aggression in Ukraine), and amid the still all-too-frequent cynical pursuit of profit with little concern for human and non-human animal lives and for addressing the pressing environmental and social challenges we face on our planet. Less dramatically, we also need to become better equipped to interact with clients from different backgrounds, to serve multiple stakeholders, and to deal with varied complex challenges.

Codes of ethics are made of rules, which unambiguously spell out what can or cannot be done, and standards, which state general principles that still give room to interpretation (Kahneman, Sibony, and Sunstein, 2021). Rules such as “identify accurately ... my ICF Credentials” (ICF, 2022, Section III, 20) and standards such as “commit to excellence” (ICF, 2022, Section II, 16) are helpful but just don’t cut it in today’s troubled world.

However, our ethical reflection can be enlightened by a combination of philosophical ethics and interculturalism.

Both disciplines invite us to go beyond our current worldview, to challenge our assumptions, to question our current notions of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. Philosophical ethics allows us to appreciate the multiple and sometimes contradictory perspectives great philosophers offer about ethics. Intercultural coaching enables us to become aware of our cultural biases, to suspend premature judgments that merely reflect these biases, and to be able instead to make informed choices that consider alternative cultural views as well. In a study conducted by Turner and Passmore (2018) of 101 participants (i.e., primarily coaching supervisors and coaches), only 9.5% of respondents mentioned cultural norms when asked: “What other factors are important for practitioners to consider within their ethical supervision/coaching practice in making good decisions?” So, while it is advantageous to have ethical codes urging coaches to ‘be sensitive to culture’ (ICF, 2022, Section III, 23; Global Code of Ethics, 2022, 2.18), there
may not be enough emphasis on how to incorporate cultural sensitivity into one’s practice and how to consider multiple cultural perspectives to deal with complex situations.

**Philosophical Ethics**

While it is beyond the scope of this article to explore diverse perspectives within philosophical ethics, a good place to start is the contrast between ‘deontology’ (from Greek δέον obligation and λόγος science, reason) and ‘teleology’ (from Greek τέλος end, purpose, and λόγος).

Immanuel Kant is regarded as the central figure in *deontological* ethics (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2020). In this view, “no matter how morally good their consequences, some choices are morally forbidden”. “Conformity with a moral norm” is what matters (Kant, 1785).

Kant’s categorical imperative states that we must absolutely forgo any attitude or intention that leads to actions that could not be universalized, or that we would not wish to see become universal law (Kant, 1785).

Importantly, Kant’s deontology is not determined heteronomously, i.e., is not about urging us to comply with an external code of ethics. Rather, our choice should be dictated freely by our own conscience. Even if there is no guarantee that our conscience will always be wisely informed, Kant’s categorical imperative invites us to ponder an essential coaching question: How can I act in a way that could be universalized and makes me worthy of being called human?

Opening this space for introspection, meditation and reflection is more likely to promote positive change than lecturing about ethics (Zollo & et al., 2018; Siqueira & Pitassi, 2016). Consistent with these research findings, it has been my experience that this sort of questioning in a safe coaching environment helps executives to think in a more long-term and systemic fashion. They are more likely to realize that business practices that prolong unsustainability cannot be universalized and are therefore not morally acceptable. These executives are then more prone to consider eco-friendly alternatives: ‘regenerative sustainability’ to repair the commons (e.g., How can I contribute to restore this ecosystem to health?) and ‘coevolutionary sustainability’ to ensure “human and non-human systems coexist together in synergy” (e.g., How can I better integrate my activities with nature?) (Landrum, 2024). This sustainable approach allows coaches and executives to counter the deleterious “Tragedy of the Commons” phenomenon when we pursue our own self-interest and end up damaging the common resources that are crucial for our own well-being and the well-being of others (Hardin, 1968).
Coaching is concerned with promoting joy, happiness, and flourishing (Seligman, 2002, 2011; Smith, Boniwell, & Green, 2021; Rosinski, 2010). However, Kant reminds us that we must be worthy of the happiness to which we aspire and adamantly intend to put duty above our own personal desire for happiness.

*Teleological* theories “first identify what is good in the state of affairs and then characterize right acts entirely in terms of that good” (Encyclopedia.com, 2022). Said more crudely: the end justifies the means! By contrast, deontology focuses on rightness or wrongness of behaviors, regardless of the good that is produced. To simplify, while doing right is good for deontology, doing good is right for teleology.

Teleological theories vary in terms of what ‘good’ means, referring either to consequences (i.e., consequentialism) or to the intrinsic properties of human traits or characteristics (i.e., virtue ethics).

Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart-Mill are the proponents of *utilitarianism*, the best-known form of consequentialism, which advocates “the greatest happiness for the greatest number” (Bentham, 1789). Bentham insisted that “all forms of pleasure are of equal value” and was for “a fundamental human equality, with complete happiness being accessible to all, regardless of social class or ability”. Two centuries ago, Bentham was already promoting “diversity and inclusion”, a contemporary imperative coaches cannot ignore (Rosinski, 2022). Moreover, Bentham was concerned about sentient beings, not just humans: “The question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?” (Bentham, 1789). John Stuart Mill (1863) considered the quality of pleasures, not just the quantity, attributing more weight to higher, intellectual pleasures than to baser, physical ones. He was a proponent of liberty, believing that people should be free to do whatever makes them happy, even if it could harm them, but that they are not entitled to act in ways that could harm others.

Thus, for utilitarians, our legitimate quest for happiness also comes with a caveat. For Mill, it does not mean seeking our own personal satisfaction above all else; it must be compatible, and indeed harmoniously connected with the general well-being.

It is difficult to imagine “doing the greatest good for the greatest number” in today’s world without referring to planetary environmental, social, and economic imperatives, such as in particular those captured in the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015). From this perspective, it would be unethical for coaches to help corporations in their pursuit of profit, if their quest is unbridled, done at the expense of the environment and under undignified social conditions.

Coaching associations ethics have recently attempted to address these questions (e.g., Am aware of
my and my clients’ impact on society. I adhere to the philosophy of “doing good” versus “avoiding bad” ICF, 2022) but without describing more specifically what this would entail (for example by adhering to the 17 UN SDGs). The utilitarian crucial coaching question is: How could I foster the greatest good for the greatest number? However, to be able to generate substantial answers, our questioning needs to be informed by acquiring knowledge about sustainability.

Aristotle is the father of virtue ethics (335-322 BC), the other branch in teleological ethics. Aristotle confronts us with powerful coaching questions: What kind of person do we want to be? How can we increase our humanity in this situation? How can we become a good person? How can we act as a role model? He also invites us to ask ourselves: What would be the prudent choice here? For Aristotle, prudence (a cardinal virtue) is the ‘golden mean’ (i.e., happy medium) between two vices. For example, courage is the happy mean between cowardice (a vice of defect, lack of courage) and recklessness (a vice of excess, too much courage). This exploration invites us to go beyond resolving immediate ethical dilemmas. It enables us to grow as human beings.

Interculturalism

‘Coaching across cultures’ or ‘intercultural coaching’ (i.e., systematically integrating interculturalism into coaching; Rosinski, 2003) implies considering cultural variations within deontology while augmenting it with teleology. In other words, it implies adopting a more complete view of ethics.

The Cultural Orientations Framework (COF) (see Rosinski, 2003, 2010, 2018) is an integrative framework that can serve both to uncover limitations in traditional coaching ethics and to expand our cultural worldview for a more complete and fitting coaching ethics. Truly universal norms require expanding our cultural worldview, incorporating lessons from alternative cultural perspectives, and making the most of differences (promoting unity in diversity, mutual enrichment).

A ‘cultural orientation’ is an inclination to think, feel, or act in a way that is culturally determined, or at least influenced by culture. For example, Direct and Indirect are two polar-opposite cultural orientations, which make up the direct-indirect communication cultural dimension. The ‘right’ way of communicating depends on the cultural context. More generally, the COF points to possible variations in ethical choices, which extend beyond national cultural differences alone. For example, should we emphasize coherence (i.e., the same rule for everyone – Universalism) or flexibility (i.e., adjust to specific circumstances – Particularism), competitive stimulation (Competitive) or mutual support
(Collaborative), etc.? Our responses are likely to reflect our cultural biases. Generally, considering one orientation and overlooking its polar opposite will produce avoidable ethical risks. On the other hand, enlarging our cultural worldview and synthesizing opposites, whenever possible, is a safe way to find optimal ethical solutions.

For example, Control without Humility might lead us to inadvertently pushing coachees beyond their limitations, while Humility without Control might result in not encouraging them to take responsibility. Control with Humility, on the other hand, invites us to take charge while recognizing what is beyond our control, to promote sustainable success versus success at all costs.

Past without Future might explain failing to consider the impact of decisions and actions on future generations, while Future without Past might mean failing to learn from history and past mistakes. Past with Future is more likely to result in learning from the past to promote sustainability and flourishing.

Individualistic without Collectivistic might lead us to turn societal challenges into a matter of personal values, emphasizing individual freedom while failing to consider our collective destiny. Collectivistic without Individualistic might prevent self-actualization, minimizing individual freedom and accountability by overly emphasizing affiliation with the group. Individualistic with Collectivistic would be conducive to promoting individual and collective accountability, acknowledging personal motives, and striving to use them to serve the collective.

These are just some of the 17 cultural dimensions that make up the COF model, without considering the COF dimensions that can be added to the COF assessment on a tailored basis. More examples can be found in (Rosinski & Pavese, 2023).

Moreover, intercultural coaching can be applied at different interconnected levels (individual, team, organization, and society) and directly contributes to coaching ethics. At the team level, intercultural coaching is an antidote against both polarization and conformism. On the contrary, by enabling coaches and coachees to leverage diversity, it promotes performance, creativity, and innovation (Sunstein & Hastie, 2015; Reynolds & Lewis, 2017; Rosinski, 2019). At the organizational level, it allows them to avoid cultural differences in mergers and acquisitions and in strategic alliances becoming a derailer by turning them instead into a factor of success (Global M&A Report 2023; Rosinski, 2010; Fernandes, 2021; Weber, Tarba, & Oberg, 2014). Intercultural coaching also helps to facilitate transformational partnerships that constitute the UN SDG number 17 (“Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development”; United Nations, 2015). Partners take
on new perspectives and jointly develop innovative sustainable business approaches (e.g., Rabobank and WWF Chile promoting environmentally and socially responsible salmon farming – Rotterdam School of Management, 2023). The ability to leverage differences is indeed crucial as Ricardo Bosshard of WWF Chile remarked: “The irony is, the more different organizations are, the more potential there is for bigger gain but at the same time, the more difficult it will be to implement the partnerships” (Bosshard, 2023). More generally, at all levels, intercultural coaching enables unity in diversity as a form of mutual enrichment in place of division.

While different philosophical ethics can sometimes provide us with conflicting messages about whether an action is right or wrong (e.g., trolley dilemma - Thomson, 1976), they do coincide in determining that intercultural coaching enhances ethics: surely, for Aristotle, Kant, and Bentham alike, promoting human consciousness, compassion, creativity and unity is preferable over prejudice, discrimination, and disunion, which still all-too-often prevail in the world today.

References


