Phronesis (Practical Wisdom) as the Key to Professional Ethics in Coaching

Kristján Kristjánsson

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ABSTRACT: I understand coaching as a multi-faceted profession; and the theoretical assumption undergirding this short paper is that the professional ethics of coaching is best grounded in a general virtue ethical approach to the professional ethics, centered around the ideal of phronesis (practical wisdom) in an Aristotelian sense. For Aristotle (1985), we seek evidence not only in the theories of “the wise” but also the views of “the many.” I would thus be inclined to ground a virtue ethical approach to coaching empirically in the extensive research already conducted at the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues into various professionals, and to ground it theoretically in recent efforts to revive an Aristotelian concept of phronesis as excellence in ethical decision-making (see further in Kristjánsson, 2024).

Keywords: Professional ethics; virtue ethics; phronesis; ethics education; coaching.

Type of session: Research-based

Introduction

Throughout most of the 20th century, utilitarianism was the dominant moral framework justifying the role of professions in society, complemented however with a deontological (rule-based) take on the practical ethics of professionals. The way to keep professional agents on the path of appropriate behavior – and strengthen their public reputation, acknowledged legitimacy, and communal support – was seen to lie in ever-more detailed ethical codes, prescribing correct behavior, as well as procedures and sanctions to secure such behavior. Repeated scandals (including those of sexual harassment) within all the main professions, often exposed by intra-professional whistle-blowers, have shaken the foundations of this conviction.

1. Professor Kristján Kristjánsson, Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, School of Education, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, B15 2TT, U.K. Email: k.kristjansson@bham.ac.uk
As a consequence, focusing attention on the professional *phronesis* (practical wisdom) of practitioners is now seen by many as a helpful way to rescue professional ethics from the clutches of a stale rule-and-code-based formalism and a culture of mere compliance (Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2024). This has created a fertile ground for theoretically minded virtue ethicists, operating within the fields of professional ethics, as well as for empirical studies exploring the typical virtues and vices of different professions. In the last 25 years or so, virtue ethics has thus gradually equaled or even surpassed deontology and utilitarianism as the theory of choice within academic professional ethics in areas such as teacher ethics, business ethics, medical ethics, and nursing ethics. I see no reason why the professional ethics of coaching could not follow suit.

**Research into U.K. professions**

Research undertaken by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues between 2012 and 2022 into virtues in United Kingdom (U.K.) professions explored the place of virtue in six different professions: law, medicine, teaching, business and finance, nursing, and policing. In each of the profession-specific studies, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were conducted with first-year and final-year trainees, experienced professionals, and educators. Across all six studies, a total of 4,136 professionals participated. There is no space here to delineate all the findings. In short, the professions differ greatly from one another in terms of their sense of professional purpose and their application of reasoning strategies to solve ethical quandaries. They also differ internally with respect to the level of professional expertise that each practitioner has gathered. One of the most important findings is that those professionals who rank themselves as high on both moral virtues (such as compassion) and intellectual virtues (such as good judgment) score highest in terms of professional purpose (Kristjánsson, 2024).

**The *phronesis* construct**

The concept of *phronesis* (practical wisdom), in general, and professional *phronesis*, in particular, is nothing less than the key concept holding together the approach of virtue-based professional ethics represented in this paper. Indeed, the biggest growth industry in *phronesis* research in the last couple of decades has not been within philosophy, psychology, or even moral/character education, but rather within professional ethics: the ethics of medicine, teaching, nursing, business, social work, policing, the military, and so forth.
Generally speaking, phronesis, as defined by Aristotle (1985)\(^2\), is an intellectual meta-virtue that helps a moral agent to integrate and adjudicate upon the (sometimes) conflicting messaging coming from the different discrete moral, civic, and performance virtues. According to recent neo-Aristotelian analyses, phronesis encompasses four different functions/components: moral perception, emotional regulation, moral identity, and moral reasoning/adjudication (Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2024). As phronesis co-ordinates different functions, it is perhaps best likened to the role of a decathlon coach who integrates competencies in ten different sports (although phronesis is of course not a discrete individual human “coach” operating within our mind).

**Phronesis education**

How do we educate phronesis? Because Aristotle himself and contemporary virtue ethicists have been fairly reticent about the nuts and bolts of phronesis education, we must rely on various educated guesses and hypotheses (Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2024). For example, coaching trainees need to be presented with workplace dilemmas and asked to analyze them, as well as the available action options. A lot of the initial educative work simply involves *virtue literacy*: the ability to spot virtues, name them, and apply them to one’s own domains of experience.

Much of professional ethics will be *caught* from the work environment and organizational culture through “osmosis”. A non-virtue-friendly ethos, for instance one steeped in rules and regulations but inimical to individual reflection, can thus hinder the development and execution of phronesis. Whatever the quality of teaching materials on offer, for example in the form of a well-designed CPD course for coaches on virtue-based professional ethics, no significant learning will take place unless the workplace culture is conducive to such learning.

Quite a lot is also known about how to build a sense of purpose and moral identity in young people (Damon, 2008), but less is known about how such teaching can interact with work on the other components of phronesis, or how it contributes to a sense of professional purpose among coaches and other professionals.

Every cloud has a silver lining, however. Considerable educational research exists, under other

\(^2\) Aristotelian moral philosophy is grounded in the ideal of flourishing (eudaimonia), which is obviously a Western construct. However, it contains significant similarities to non-Western ideals, as brought out when I asked international experts on Buddhism, Confucianism, and the African Ubuntu philosophy to explicate their respective concepts of a flourishing life (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t0DgijorXhs).
designations, that actually appears to be about the cultivation of what Aristotle called “phronesis” (or at least crucial components of it), either indirectly or directly. Notice here research about metacognitions, post-formal thinking, self-reflection, social reasoning, professional expertise, tacit knowledge, and various other related topics (see Kallio, 2020). The trick, then, is not to reinvent the wheel but try to build on what other researchers have done in overlapping areas. In other words, new interventions will not need to be constructed de novo; the key will lie in combining them together correctly under the guidance of a holistic model of phronesis.

We in my research center have not yet had a chance to create a phronesis intervention for coaching trainees or experienced coaches built on the above model of phronesis. As an example of what teaching professional phronesis to coaches can look like in practice, however, consider a recent Jubilee Centre intervention to teach phronesis to police students. Only having four classes to play with, it was decided to devote those mostly to a deep discussion of topical police dilemmas, constructed by an expert panel. After introducing the dilemmas, through a guided discussion, the students were asked to discuss and reach a conclusion about various questions, including: (1) Which virtues or values are competing and steering the police officer in different directions? (2) What are the pros and cons of each action option? (3) Is the police officer experiencing strong emotions prior to the decision? (4) If so, what are those emotions? (5) What should the police officer do, in your view? At the close of the intervention, the students were asked to relate their answers to the police Code of Ethics. A post-test with a phronesis measure (Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2024) was then administered to gauge whether progress had been made during the intervention in phronetic decision-making (compared to a pre-test with the same measure), with respect to one or more of the components/functions of phronesis.

The intervention, sketched above, was no rocket science. The aim was, somewhat obviously, to help students develop the different components of phronesis, by taking them through some of the considerations that motivate and (ideally) strengthen each component. The method of teaching was a guided discussion about relevant dilemmas: a method that has a long history in approaches to moral education and professional ethics education. I see no reason why a similar intervention could not work for coaching trainees.

**Conclusion**

The two most vocal champions of phronesis as part of professional ethics education claim that it “is not
something that can be taught” (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010) – although they probably understand the term “teaching” more narrowly in this context than Aristotle did. While I would not go as far as Schwartz and Sharpe, it is worth reminding readers of the well-known Chinese fable of the farmer who impatiently tried to pull up his rice shoots to make them grow faster, as a result of which they lost their rootedness and withered away. Young coaching trainees, for instance, need to be fed a diet that does not exhaust their capacities for digestion – which is not the same as saying that they should not be provided with an intellectual initiation into some of the tough and discretionary choices that await them and with a stark warning that no rule book will relieve them of the responsibility for making those choices themselves. A successful career in coaching is one made up of sound choices, including ethical ones.

References


