

Is Developmental Coaching Morally Acceptable?

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to challenge the concept of development as an inherently positive process for human beings, particularly in the context of coaching. Drawing from Foucault (2001), Han (2015) and Illouz (2007), I will show how the concept of human development is linked to a view of the 'self' (1) which is relative to the specific historical and social context of our times and (2) which contains a contradiction between the claim of freedom, happiness and success and a reality which hides subtly but deeply internalized power dynamics. I suggest that coaching in general and particularly developmental coaching is one of the practices which has been produced by the mainstream therapeutic discourse to codify and normalize how the 'self' should be shaped and transformed in order to adhere to the demands of the economic and social system. The normative aspect of the modern therapeutic discourse and developmental coaching however is not self-evident, but hidden in a narrative which appears to present itself as non-normative and which considers individual freedom as the supreme value. This contradiction is quite implicit and subtle because instead of being the result of a struggle between individuals and an external system of authority, in the present historical context it becomes an individually internalized conflict (Han, 2015).

Keywords: Foucault, developmental coaching, freedom, happiness, success, power

Introduction

The title of this essay is a deliberately provocative question. My guess is that most coaches would probably answer that developmental coaching may not be within the scope of their activity, but not that it poses moral dilemmas. What can be more worthy and noble than caring for others' personal development? What can be more fulfilling and satisfying for human beings than expressing their potential and developing their selves? A positive answer seems obvious, while a negative one seems paradoxical, or at least exaggerated. Some scholars, however, (Berger, 2006; Bachkirova and Cox, 2007; Cox and Jackson, 2014) have indeed noted that working developmentally in the coaching context may be problematic from an ethical point of view on the grounds that there would be a risk of presenting development as a too simplistic process and of contradicting the principle by which coaching is seen as a partnership between

equals. However, these critiques can be seen more as invitations to caution than fundamental challenges to the concept of development. In this paper, I will argue that, from an ethical point of view – but not only - the concept of development is much more complex and problematic than it may seem and that, in order to fully appreciate its complexity, it is necessary to consider the phenomenon of developmental coaching within the historical and cultural context of our time. Adopting a contextual perspective is quite useful to expand our view and understand more deeply what coaches may be actually doing when, with the best of intentions, they coach developmentally.

First, I will discuss the notion of self, which I see naturally and closely intertwined with the concept of human development. In my discussion, I will adopt a social-constructivist point of view (Berger and Luckmann, 1967); this choice is motivated by the fact that my whole argumentation stems from an interest to uncover the social and relative nature of the concept of development and how it is connected to the phenomenon of coaching. Through this discussion I will also try to describe some of the characteristics of the ‘modern self’ in relation to the current historical and cultural context, with the intention of showing how the way we think of the ‘self’ today is relative to our times and our *weltanschauung* – in this section of the paper I will draw some ideas from a literature that is not normally cited in the coaching field (the only exception I found is Schulz, 2013). I will then review some of the concepts of developmental coaching and discuss how they relate to the notion of self within the context I describe. Finally, I will draw some conclusions and raise the possibility that developmental coaching could indeed contribute to a shaping of the self which can be detrimental to individual freedom.

Perspectives of the ‘modern self’

The concept of development is implicitly quite complex and problematic because it involves questions about the meaning and purpose of human life and thus different contexts and perspectives lead to different interpretations of what human development is - or should be, if development is seen as a normative process. Hence, there is not a unified view or theory of what development means for individuals and different scholars have presented different approaches to development and developmental coaching (Hunt and Weintraub, 2004; Bachkirova, 2011; Berger, 2006; Laske, 1999; Chandler and Kram, 2005; Berman and Bradt, 2006; McLean, P.D., 2012). I will not review all these approaches here, I will just comment that despite the differences there is quite wide consensus that developmental coaching requires introspection and is thus concerned with the ‘self’, seen as the subjective experience of what being

human means. Development and self are thus two notions very closely intertwined and equally elusive. On the one hand, it seems impossible to answer any questions about development without clarifying what the self is; on the other, explaining the nature of the self in absolute terms is extremely difficult and controversial and has been debated throughout the history of philosophy. I will not attempt to answer this question in this essay; instead, I will adopt a social constructivist point of view and look at the self as a social construction - the way a particular society sees the self through the cultural devices it has developed in response to historical changes.

Social organization and culture are of course closely linked, but cannot be fully appreciated in their specificity without a third dimension, history, which plays a fundamental role in challenging the idea that the present context, values, habits and ways of being are an inevitable necessity. I will come back to this topic towards the end of the essay.

For the moment, I would like to further clarify the point of view which I will adopt in this paper, which is based on the idea (Heidegger, 2010) that human beings cannot exist outside of a cultural and historical context and questions about truths regarding humans, their values and their beliefs are only meaningful in connection to this context. Perspectives, ways of thinking and perceiving the inner and outside world and common ideas of what 'truth' is are also a production of a particular context and probably make sense, literally, only in relation to the context which has produced them. It is the understanding of the connection between one particular 'truth' and how it is connected to the cultural and historical framework that produces it that I find most enlightening as it opens, especially through historical and cross-cultural analysis, the possibility of other 'truths' in form of what success is and what values, ways of being, and maybe life choices should be pursued; in other words, it offers the opportunity to consider alternatives to the mainstream model of life, which is, I think, an important opportunity for increased freedom.

The way I look at the self in this essay is in relation to the current historical and cultural context. Many scholars have studied the self from a cultural point of view. For Cushman (2009, p. 23), "the self embodies what a culture believes is humankind's place in the cosmos" and Baumeister (1999, p. 9) notes that "the independent, autonomous, highly complex self is historically relative, emerging in Western history over the last few centuries" and that "[c]ultural differences in selfhood confirm the relativity of the self" (p. 9). Both Cushman and Baumeister try to delineate a history of how the self has evolved through history in Western culture and note that the 'modern self' is

characterized by autonomy and self-reference, and that the quest of self-fulfillment has become its reason for living. Markus and Kityama (1999) have studied how Asian and Western cultures produce surprisingly different concepts of the self that “can in many cases determine the very nature of individual experience” (p. 339). While Asian cultures are based on a collectivist and interdependent concept of the self, the modern self in Western societies is individualistic and independent. Also, Foucault (2001) argues that the self should not be considered as a hidden reality and therefore something to be known and liberated, but as a production of the technologies of self that it has co-evolved with through history. In the later period of Foucault’s reflection, the problem of the self came to occupy the center of the stage and his main philosophical question concerned the way human beings think of themselves in relation to their selves through what he calls the ‘technologies of the self’, defined as the set of institutions, practices, cultural devices that act upon individuals by power dynamics which are internal to their own sense of themselves. The question about ‘what are we now?’ and ‘how do we become what we are?’ are quite modern philosophical questions compared to the classic metaphysical dilemmas that have crossed the whole history of philosophy and it is precisely the centrality of the self as a historically situated entity which makes Foucault’s later thinking, which presents the possibility of human beings as subjects of resistance rather than subjects of power, relevant and interesting for the discussion I propose in this paper. I will come back to Foucault towards the end of this paper when I lay out some options for future research.

Coaching and the self

The question is, then, how this historically and contextualized view of the self is linked to coaching. It may seem logical that there must be some connections but I will try to be more precise in what follows. In order to lay out my argument I will need quite a long premise to describe some of the characteristics of the social and economic context we live in and how some relevant cultural aspects have come to develop within it. If we look at coaching in its context and ask ourselves why it has become so popular today, I think that at least part of the answer involves the change of the management culture which started at the beginning of the last century and the rise of what Eva Illouz calls ‘soft capitalism’.

Illouz (2007) describes a movement in society which symbolically started in the 1920s with Elton Mayo’s famous Hawthorne experiments and which reshaped the working relationships introducing the language of psychology within the corporate world. Businesses increasingly involved psychologists in

an attempt to solve issues of efficiency and productivity in a production environment which required maximizing collaboration - and thus facilitating human relationships - in order to maximize profit. The solution provided by Mayo's experiment, and developed further within the psychological field over the decades, was that modern workers, in order to foster collaboration within the workplace, had to possess very specific qualities which we could summarize as the ability to understand others' perspective, to have a more realistic self-perception, and to recognize and deal rationally with their own and others' emotions. Communication was the main tool to implement the new way of being of the modern manager and success depended on one's ability to communicate in the forms demanded by the business - recognizing others' emotions, being empathic, having an objective view of oneself, exercising techniques of sociability, and being authentic. I think one of the consequences is that individuals were incentivized to adopt the required ways of being in order to reach success and economic wealth. There is thus an intrinsic contradiction between the demand of authenticity and the economic reward - authenticity becomes a strategic means to achieve the more concrete goal of success and this is perhaps one of the reasons why the 'self' has become so problematic in today's Western world. I am only briefly noting this aspect here as it is not the main topic of this essay, but it certainly deserves a deeper analysis. Going back to the main argument, these new demands which emerged from the business environment were gradually transposed to the family and private sphere of individuals to the point that, following Illouz (2008), the psychological discourse has now become central for the constitution of the modern self:

Therapy under many forms has been diffused worldwide on a scale that is comparable (and perhaps even superior) to that of American popular culture. Whether it has assumed the form of introspective psychoanalysis, a New Age 'mind-body' workshop, or an 'assertiveness training' program, it has mustered a rare level of cultural legitimacy across a wide variety of social groups, organizations, institutions, and cultural settings. The therapeutic discourse has crossed and blurred the compartmentalized spheres of modernity and has come to constitute one of the major codes with which to express, shape, and guide selfhood. (Illouz, 2008, p. 6)

I consider coaching one of the forms the psychological discourse has taken and one of the practices the modern self uses to shape itself. As these practices clearly have a historically situated origin and have grown within the context of modern capitalism, I would argue that in order to understand coaching as a phenomenon, with all its ethical implications, it is necessary to examine it within its socio-cultural context. Moreover, I suggest it is important

for coach practitioners to understand more deeply what they are doing when they coach a client and fully appreciate all the (potential) consequences.

So far, I have tried to show that one of the characteristics of the modern self is its concern with oneself and aspiration to transform itself in order to achieve success, but also to improve its family relationship. I would like now to add another aspect of discussion in order to integrate the partial picture I have built of the present context. I am only highlighting some elements I deem important for the purpose of this paper and I certainly do not pretend to be exhaustive.

The philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2015) proposes a very interesting and meaningful interpretation of our culture as the ‘society of achievement’ as opposed to the ‘society of discipline’ of the XIX century:

Today’s society is no longer Foucault’s disciplinary world of hospitals, madhouses, prisons, barracks and factories. It has long been replaced by another regime, namely a society of fitness studios, office towers, banks, airports, shopping malls, and generic laboratories. Twenty-first-century society is no longer a disciplinary society, but rather an achievement society. (Han, 2015, p. 8)

Han notes that disciplinary society is characterized by the negativity of prohibition that produces madmen and criminals through the imperative of *Should*. Achievement society on the contrary is characterized by an *excess of positivity* which creates burnout and depression through the imperative of *Can*. Today’s world requires the maximization of productivity and the achievement-subject is much more productive than the disciplined-subject, as the *Can* implies unlimited boundaries. While the discipline-subject is granted gratification once he has accomplished his duty, the achievement-subject is never gratified because the *Can* has no limits, no points of reference, no final accomplishment. The only way forward is to continue to achieve in an endless and exhausting process.

Han continues by mentioning that the Freudian model of the psyche reflects the schema of disciplinary society - the ego is repressed by prohibitions, boundaries and imperatives; in the achievement society, the super-ego becomes the *ideal ego*. While the super ego prohibits and represses, the *ideal ego* seduces by inducing the ego to project itself onto the ideal one and this projection is interpreted as an act of freedom by the subject. However, Han warns us, “when the ego gets caught in an attainable goal, it gets crushed altogether. The gap between real ego and ideal ego then brings forth auto-

aggression” (p. 46) and thus, he concludes, “achievement society is the society of self-exploitation” (p. 47) where “burnout represents the pathological consequence of *voluntary* self-exploitation” (p. 44)

In Han, we find again the theme of internalization of power dynamics we have seen in Foucault (2001): the imperative of achieving does not come from an external agent, the Other, but from the self itself, who, in turns, think of itself as ‘master of itself’, free from any external instance of domination. But this freedom is yet another form of constraint, more precisely the “free constraint of maximizing achievement” (Han, 2015, p. 11). Han’s picture of the current context is extremely bitter and contrasts with the optimism which, after the Second World War, welcomed the era of freedom, democracy, consumerism, abundance.

Developmental coaching: a critical perspective

As we have seen, the notion of self is tightly intertwined with the notion of development, as development is seen as the process through which the self can shape itself. I believe this perspective is both useful and important to understand the links between concepts of development and the current historical context in relation to the idea of self. I will now show that these links contribute to define some of the ways developmental coaching is interpreted and tends to influence the way clients see themselves, their role in society and ultimately their subjectivity.

As other authors (Baumeister, 1999; Cushman, 1995) have suggested, the modern self is subject to stronger pressures to adapt and conform itself to the demands of the external world. These pressures are not of the ‘disciplinary’ type, they do not require or prohibit certain behaviors; they tend to work internally by creating images of an ‘ideal self’. I would like now to see how this state of affairs influences some of the theories of development which are most relevant in today’s world and for coaching in particular.

One of the visions of self-development which has become quite popular in Western and American culture in particular is self-actualization – a concept presented by the Humanist movement (Rogers, 1961; Maslow, 1971) which was considered a novelty at the time of publication. The rejection of Freudian determinism led to the development of the view that human beings are equipped with a built-in motivation to express their potential to the fullest extent possible. The definition of self-actualization is quite vague, however, and resonates with the idea of never-ending achievement evoked by Han (2015).

Moreover, if we push this argument to the extreme, it follows that self-actualization becomes a necessity, an imperative. It was Maslow (1971) who proposed the idea that health and self-actualization were one and the same thing and that one could not have one without the other. The deduction is that those who do not achieve self-actualization - whatever that means - are now sick, or not normal. Illouz (2007) brilliantly analyzes the type of therapeutic - or pseudo-therapeutic – discourse which emerges from the mass-media culture in the USA and which we may call the “narrative of the healthy self”. The pattern she recognizes is the following: “once an emotional state is defined as healthy and desirable, all behaviors or states which fall short of this ideal, point not only to unconscious emotions preventing one from reaching health but also to a secret desire to run away from it. [...] If we secretly desire our misery, then the self can be made directly responsible for alleviating it.” (p. 47). The example provided by Illouz is that of an over-weight woman with marital issues who is unable to lose weight. The diagnosis provided by the ‘narrative of the healthy self’ is that she secretly does not want to lose weight as retaliation against her husband. This pattern follows from Maslow’s idea that success is accessible to anybody and that it is the fear of success that prevents individuals from aspiring to self-fulfillment. In Kegan’s ‘immunity to change’ proposition (Kegan and Lahey, 2001) we can recognize a similar pattern. The ‘diagnosis’ of immunity to change is that individuals do not evolve because of competing commitments based on some ‘Big assumption’. However, what is the ‘competing commitment’ if not an emotion or state that does not conform to the desired ideal? As in the example of the over-weight woman in Illouz (2007), the managers who were part of the study in Kegan and Lahey (2001), express the aspiration of some kind of improvement of their way of being but end up realizing they are ‘secretly’ acting against their aspirations, for various reasons. Hence, the responsibility for not attaining their goals always ends up on the shoulders of the individual and never on those of the organization or wider socio-economic context. In Schultz (2013), we see the same pattern in an empirical study conducted within an organization. The participants of the study were managers who accepted to be video-taped during their coaching sessions. The recordings show how the coach subtly but consistently suggested that the responsibility for their failures or shortcomings was in the managers themselves and not in the inefficiencies and organizational flaws of the company they worked for. In my experience as a coach, I have listened many times to clients explaining the difficulties they encounter in trying to achieve a challenging objective by improving and changing themselves and then conclude that their efforts were useless ‘maybe it is because I don’t want to’. Taylor and Cranton (2013) also note that the ideas of humanism “reflect Western and particularly

North American values and beliefs [that] anyone can achieve anything, anyone can and should have the opportunity for freedom and happiness” (p. 39). The idea that individuals are responsible for their own ‘success’ (whatever that means), that everyone can shape their own destiny just by will power ignores the role played by the current social organization, existing privileges, constraints and luck and places all the responsibility on the self.

Developmental coaching as a term was initially understood in the literature as one of the coaching genres (Sperry, 2002; Hunt and Weintraub, 2002; Grant and Cavanagh, 2004; Jackson, 2005), but it lacked a clearly defined theoretical foundation (Cox and Jackson, 2014). More recently, some scholars started researching concepts and theories related to human development and more theoretically grounded research began to appear in the literature. In particular, the cognitivist developmental theories which were produced within the psychology field since the 1970s have attracted the attention of the coaching literature, particularly the theory of orders of consciousness proposed by Kegan (1982). Kegan himself has moved away from psychological research and now does coaching and leadership development in organizations (Kegan and Lahey, 2001; Bachkirova, 2009).

Within the framework of cognitivist developmental theories, development is seen as a process, organized in hierarchical stages, which implies the existence of mental structures subject to a transformation. The underlying structuralism of this view casts an ontological status over the nature of development (Laske, 1999) and postulates the universality of developmental trajectories (Berger, 2006). However, not only are these assumptions extremely strong, but they are also quite problematic in relation to the ethical discussion which is the object of this essay. First of all, as noted by Sugarman (2001), “no matter how much data we were able to collect about the course of an individual’s life this, of itself, would not enable us to define what is meant by the term development” (p. 3). This observation seems consistent with the construction of self as a cultural and historical product, thus any definition of development cannot be envisaged without value judgments and norms of what it means to grow and develop. What should be the end point of the development of the self? The term ‘development’ implicitly requires norms to discern changes which are ‘good’ and produce an improvement from those which are ‘bad’ or neutral. If we consider Kegan’s subject-to-object movement, the progression towards the higher order of consciousness can be seen as a response to the demand of individuals who are able to understand others’ perspectives and are capable of more accurate self-perception. Kegan himself is quite explicit about the adaptive function of adult development and he comes to

the conclusion that we are ‘in over our heads’ and that most adults do not have the ability to cope with the demands of modern life. What we see in Kegan is an explicit theorization of how the self should develop itself in order to conform to demands of the outside world – while in the humanistic view the idea of what self-actualization means in practice remains quite obscure. From this point of view Kegan’s original proposition may be considered more ‘honest’ in the sense that it does not hide its relativity to the historical and cultural context. However, it certainly lacks any critique to the social context and, like the humanistic approach, holds individuals responsible for their own success. Also, Erikson (2007) has shown that Kegan’s pessimistic view on the current state of humanity with regards to its adaptive capabilities is not confirmed by empirical evidence. This finding suggests that there may be other dimensions of development, besides the cognitive one, which are equally important for adaptation. Bachkirova (2011), drawing from Wilber (2000), reminds us of the inherent complexity of human beings who develop along a variety of dimensions. The order of development in relation to each dimension is given, but the multi-way interactions between the different dimensions cannot be predicted and give rise to an infinity of possible combinations. Humans are complex, and Kegan’s theory is rightly criticized for being overly simplistic (see for example Berger, 2006).

Conclusion

I have shown through the previous paragraphs that the concept of development may be problematic from an ethical point of view because (1) it involves the ‘self’, the way human beings build their subjectivity, which is the most intimate and unique experience of human life and one of the ways individuals express their freedom; (2) it tends to reflect socially accepted value judgements of how individuals should shape their subjectivity and thus may threaten individual freedom; (3) it places the responsibility for achievements entirely on individuals and thus can lead to the internalization of problems which may be caused by external factors (society, organizations, historical reality, etc.); (4) it lacks any critique to the social context and has a tendency to present itself as a universal principle; (5) it contributes to the ‘society of achievement’ where individuals may become entangled in a dynamic of endless self-exploitation.

It is clear, then, that development is not a straightforward and uncontroversial topic, and that personal happiness and the ultimate meaning and purpose of human life are very relevant to it. Are we really making our clients happier when we coach them? It is not a question which can be escaped. I

suggest that coaches, whether they explicitly use a developmental framework or not, should include this type of consideration in their personal reflections.

What is, then, the answer to the initial question? Is developmental coaching morally acceptable? A simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer certainly overly simplifies the question itself, but I would argue that it would be useful both for coaches and clients to keep in mind potential hidden contradictions implicit in the psychological discourse underpinning coaching itself and the ideas around self-improvement. From this point of view, a more realistic understanding of the self, which has been developed recently either directly in the neurological field (Damasio, 2000) or influenced by it (Kurzban, 2010; Bachkirova, 2011 and 2014; Dennet, 1991) could help individuals (1) understand the limitations of human cognition and rationality (see Dunning, 2006) and thus (2) relieve the self from the responsibility of being the sole maker of its own happiness. In general, exploring the possibility of ‘alternative’ ways of being which can still be integrated in the current social context and its demands together with an analytical effort to uncover contradictions in the coaching discourse would be an interesting way forward for research in the field of coaching. For example, Foucault (2001) dedicated part of his later work to analyze how the culture of the ‘self’ developed in the Western world and reached back to ancient Greek concept of ‘concern with oneself’ (*epimelieia heautou*) to find an idea of subjectivity derived from a different tradition, one which was mainstream in the antiquity but was not preserved. Instead, Western culture privileged the moral precept of ‘know thouself’ (*gnothi seauton*), bringing it to a position a prominence. Foucault (2001) then shows how the triumph of ‘know yourself’ is the result of a particular interpretation of ancient texts and that there are other ways, which were once dominant, to relate to one selves.

In conclusion, there are many other possible ways of thinking of the self, multiple possibilities, and inspirations to build new ones can be found both in other cultures and through history. The dependency between culture and self is an important element which could contribute to demystify the forms of development which are privileged in the context of our time and I suggest that the mere awareness of this dependency may already help coaches and clients reach a better understanding of the implications of their relationship.

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