Philosophy of Coaching: An International Journal
Vol. 6, No.2, November 2021, 7-21.
http://dx.doi.org/10.22316/poc/06.2.02

Phronesis as reflection

Andrew J.T. George
Department of Surgery and Cancer, Imperial College London
& Henley Business School, University of Reading

Abstract

Reflection is a vital skill for coaches, both in terms of helping their clients reflect and in their practice. This paper argues that the virtue of applied wisdom (phronesis), which is necessary for virtuous action, is a form of reflection. Reflection using phronesis is essential for virtuous behaviour or action that achieves the moral purpose or end (*telos*) of the client. Coaches, as key agents in behaviour change, must therefore engage in phronesis if they are to support their client to achieve their *telos*. It can also help provide an approach to ethical dilemmas. The virtue of phronesis can be developed by habit and education and should be considered when training coaches.

Keywords: Virtue ethics, phronesis*, reflection, telos, purpose*

Introduction

One of the major roles of a coach is to help their clients to reflect, which can foster behaviour change and enable sound decision making. Reflection is vital for coaches, to enable them to be more useful to their clients. Reflection is therefore central to the practice of coaching.

While there is considerable information on how coaches (and their clients) can reflect, using a range of strategies, there is little literature about the ethical content of reflection (*vide infra*). There are different forms of reflection. Some reflection has little or no moral content; if a person reflects on past experience when performing a purely technical task then there need be no ethical content to that reflection. However, much of the reflection that coaches and their clients do is purposed to enable action (normally decision making and/or behaviour change), so will nearly always have a moral dimension.

This paper argues that coaches should be more conscious about the ethical nature of the reflection that they and their clients undertake. It suggests

that consideration of the virtue of applied wisdom (phronesis), and the resulting development of character, is a useful approach to think about how ethics can be embedded in reflection.

Ethics

There are three main schools of normative ethical reasoning in Western thought (This article looks from a Western perspective, it would be enriched by consideration of other cultures and traditions (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005; Shen-bai, 2017; Bachmann, Habisch, & Dierksmeier, 2018; Lawrenz, 2021).). The two predominant ones are deontological ethics, in which an action is considered ethical if it conforms to rules, and consequentialist ethics, in which an action is considered ethical if the outcomes of that action are good (Rachels & Rachels, 2007). These approaches are frequently combined to produce ethical principles (for example in medicine) which provide a framework for practitioners to operate (Beauchamp & Childress, 1994).

Virtue ethics

A third school of ethics was developed in ancient Greece, most notably by Aristotle (MacIntyre, 1998,; Aristotle, 2009), and then refined in the Medieval period by St Thomas Aquinas (Aquinas, 1993), termed virtue ethics. This fell out of favour during the Renaissance and Age of Enlightenment (Scalzo & Alford, 2016). However, it has undergone a revival in the late 20th century and is now re-established as a major approach to normative ethics (MacIntyre, 2007).

While deontology and consequentialism place an emphasis on the action (whether it follows the rules, or leads to good outcomes), virtue ethics emphasises the character of the person carrying out the action (Rachels & Rachels, 2007). In a simplistic sense it states that if someone is virtuous, then their actions will be good. The emphasis is on developing virtues, rather than judging actions.

Virtue ethics, in particular the Aristotelian concept of phronesis (Noel, 1999; Aristotle, 2009 [1140a24-1140b30]; Koehn, Landdázuri, & Scalzo, 2020), is intertwined with reflection. Reflection, as manifested by phronesis, allows the person to navigate the competing claims of their virtues and to moderate them appropriately. Reflection is therefore essential if one is to

develop as a virtuous person, and so is a prerequisite for both coaches and clients working towards action that is good.

Virtues are character traits that can be developed by an individual (MacIntyre, 2007; Rachels & Rachels, 2007, p. 175; Aristotle, 2009 [1103a30]). While there are many virtues, the four cardinal virtues are applied wisdom, courage, justice and temperance (Pellegrino & Thomasma, 1993, p.4). Virtues lead to the moral purpose or end (*telos*) of humanity which is eudaimonia, frequently translated as flourishing or happiness (Seligman, 2002; Stovall, 2011; Koehn et al., 2020). Aristotle considered the telos was achieved through life as a whole, similar to the concept of well-being or flourishing in positive psychology (Seligman, 2011), while Aquinas saw life as a journey towards an ultimate telos, the divine (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 175).

The virtues are important for a good life and also for good work, though the nature of the virtues varies according to one's profession (courage is different for a doctor, nurse or soldier) (Pellegrino & Thomasma, 1993; Oakley & Cocking, 2001). They are not just the means to an end, exercising the virtues is a necessary part of the good life (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 149). Aristotle considered that virtues should be held at a mean (Young, 1996; Aristotle, 2009 [1107a2-6]), for example excess courage is a vice (rashness), as is not enough courage (cowardice) (Aristotle, 2009 [1107a33-1107b4]). Virtues are not isolated traits but need to be taken together (courage without temperance may not result in good behaviour) (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 155). Indeed different observers may recognise and report different virtues being expressed when they look at the same action (Newstead, Macklin, Dawkins, & Martin, 2018).

There is no universal list of virtues, how virtues are valued is contingent on the cultural understanding of the purpose and nature of society and individuals (MacIntyre, 2007). Virtues have been incorporated into thinking around positive psychology (Seligman, 2002), though in psychology they are largely considered as isolated dispositions of an individual and are neither treated as an inter-related whole (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006; Aristotle, 2009 [1144b32-35]), nor connected to that person's *telos* or role in society (MacIntyre, 2007, pp. 155 & 228). They are also treated as a monotonic measure (Seligman, 2002), and so lack the concept of an optimal mean (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006).

The capstone virtue is phronesis (Aristotle, 2009 [1140a24-1140b30]), translated as applied wisdom or prudence (though modern usage of prudence has connotations of cautiousness (Pellegrino & Thomasma, 1993, p. 84)).

Phronesis allows a person to think about, and know, the ends that they should pursue and integrate this with other virtues and concrete circumstances to develop the means to accomplish these ends (Bachmann et al., 2018; Malik, Conroy, & Turner, 2020). Exercise of phronesis allows a person to balance and integrate the virtues, finding the appropriate mean for each (MacIntyre, 2007). Phronesis is the virtue that allows a person to make the right decision, the other virtues provide motivation and the means to carry out the action.

Reflection

In looking at the connection between reflection and phronesis it is necessary to consider what reflection is. There is considerable literature in education and other circles that describes how to reflect, and also the role and importance of reflection in learning and other activities (e.g. (Hatton & Smith, 1995; Jones, 2020)). However, the term reflection is often used loosely without sufficient definition as to what the author means (Hatton & Smith, 1995).

Dewey describes reflection as "*Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends*", and outlines 5 steps that happen in reflection "*(i) a felt difficulty; (ii) it location and definition; (iii) suggestion of possible solution; (iv) development by reasoning of the bearings of the suggestion; (v) further observation and experiment leading to its acceptance or rejection*" (Dewey, 1910, pp. 6 & 72). Dewey argued that reflection was driven by the requirement to find a solution to the problem, which differentiates it from idle thinking, and so saw reflection as outcome or action orientated (Dewey, 1910 pp. 11-12).

Schön described reflection as happening 'in action', so that a practitioner reflects while they are carrying out the action, and indeed uses action as part of the reflective process (Schön, 1983, pp. 49-69). In his example, a baseball pitcher will reflect on what they are doing while they are pitching and uses 'reflection-in-action' to adjust what they are doing. While reflection-in-action is simultaneous to the action, there are different kinetics of reflection (Schön, 1983, pp. 61-62), which have been compared to an actor who reflects onstage during a performance and off stage after it (Eraut, 1994, pp. 142-149). Therefore reflection-in-action can be contrasted to reflection-on-action (Hatton & Smith, 1995).

In this model reflection is exploratory and hypothesis testing, and draws on the intuition, experience and conceptual frameworks of the person

who is reflecting (Schön, 1983, pp. 141-147). It can involve action in the reflecting process; Schön describes how an architect might physically draw a plan while reflecting (Schön, 1983, p. 80), in a similar manner that has been described during the mastery of craft skills where a practitioner will reflect through doing, and contact with their materials (Kneebone, 2020). Reflection may also be enabled through dialogue, including that between teacher and student (Tsang, 1998, 2005) or within a learning organisation (Senge, 1990).

Reflection has also been described as a hierarchy with different levels (van Manen, 1977); technical reflection is around the best means to achieve ends, practical reflection will also look at the goals and outcomes of the action while critical reflection locate the analysis in wider contexts. Other hierarchies of reflection consider issues of ethics, politics and social justice (Adler, 1991; Gore & Zeichner, 1991).

The influential 'Experiential Learning Theory' takes an alternative position and separates reflection from both abstract conceptualisation and action (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). This approach promotes 'reflective observation' as a crucial part of the experiential learning cycle, though does not define reflective observation in detail. The next stage in the cycle (abstract conceptualisation) assimilates and distils the reflections into abstract concepts, followed by active experimentation and concrete experience (Kolb & Kolb, 2018).

This apparent difference is probably more semantic than of substance. Kolb positioned his model within an historic context of other approaches to experiential or reflective learning (Kolb, 1984). Other similar models such as the ALACT (looking back on the action, awareness of essential aspects, creating alternative methods of action and trial (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005) talk about the whole process as reflective learning. Indeed, an internet search reveals that Kolb's theory is often renamed the 'reflective cycle', suggesting that for some the terms reflective and experiential are interchangeable (e.g. (Mulder, 2013).

Synthesising these concepts, leads to a definition of reflection being 'receiving information, integrating it in one's personal framework of knowledge, belief, theoretical constructs and character in order to produce an action'. The source of the information may be external, internal or feedback (including proprioception in the case of the pitcher). The resulting action may be a change in understanding, a hypothesis testing experiment, a search for

additional information or behaviour change. This reflection will frequently occur in a learning cycle, but may represent a singular decision-making point.

Phronesis **and reflection**

As described above, phronesis is a virtue that allows a person to make judgements as to the right thing to do. It is both an intellectual virtue but has a moral character that allows people to decide on how to live and act well in particular circumstances (Akrivou & Scalzo, 2020). Aquinas described it as "*disposition of our reason to right action*" (Aquinas, 1993, p. 403), while Aristotle termed it "*a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for man*" (Aristotle, 2009 [1140b4]). This has led to the suggestion that phronesis can support integration of theory and practice during reflection (Tsang, 2005). Virtue ethics has also been related to reflexivity when considering innovation (Steen, Sand, & Van de Poel, 2021) and to the self-awareness needed by professionals to act both virtuously and successfully (Stovall, 2011). Birmingham, in the context of education, goes further, equating phronesis with reflection (Birmingham, 2004).

This conceptualisation of reflection as phronesis gives reflection a moral purpose (Birmingham, 2003, 2004). Dewey suggested that reflection has a moral content, he considered that reflection joins action and character, resulting in good actions leading to good character, and vice versa in a virtuous circle (Dewey, 1932), similar to the circularity between moral character and phronesis (Noel, 1999). He also believed that there were positive moral 'dispositions' (such as open-mindedness, responsibility and wholeheartedness) necessary for reflective thought. Birmingham's identification of reflection as phronesis attempts to bind reflection and moral decision making together (Birmingham, 2003, 2004).

However, Birmingham goes too far when she equates phronesis and reflection. Phronesis has all the attributes of reflection and is a form of reflection. Given the moral nature of phronesis, reflection when carried out as phronesis will be virtuous (Birmingham, 2003). However, not all reflection employs phronesis. One could imagine gangsters using Experiential Learning Theory to improve their ability to rob banks, reflecting on previous attempts to improve their approach. However, their actions could not be considered good, both because the *telos* to which they are striving is not moral, and because they would not be holding all the virtues in balance (such as justice and honesty) (they may be exhibiting courage, however dispositions unregulated by phronesis are not virtuous (MacIntyre, 2007, pp. 154-155).

In addition, abstract conceptualisation during most experiential learning is likely to involve other forms of thinking, such as technical thinking (*techne*) (Aristotle, 2009 [1140a1-23]). This may be part of a reflective process (when learning or planning an action one can reflect on how best to use tools at one's disposal) but is not phronesis. It is equivalent to the more technical levels of reflection that are focused on means, rather than the end (van Manen, 1977; Gore & Zeichner, 1991; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005).

However, the argument that phronesis can be a form of reflection has the important consequence that reflection, when carried out as phronesis, will lead to more moral actions (Birmingham, 2004). The decisions will be, allowing for human fallibility, good decisions that will promote flourishing as a professional and a human being.

This means that reflective practice, in the form of phronesis, is essential for driving and supporting virtuous action which has a moral purpose. This, in general, leads to the flourishing of the individual, or societies that they are a member of.

It might be objected that phronesis is not necessary for virtuous behaviour because many (most) people are unaware of the concept of phronesis. However, it is not necessary to either have knowledge of, or be conscious of, a process to use it. Most people are unaware of the psychological concepts they employ daily. However, an understanding of these concepts, especially by professionals such as coaches, can result in them being used in a more skilful manner.

Reflection and moral action

Learning, decision making and behaviour change can happen without reflection. An example is behavioural training or conditioning in which humans and animals change behaviour with no conscious reflection (Eldridge & Dembkowski, 2013). Such action cannot be virtuous within the understanding of virtue ethics.

Similarly, reflection that does not involve phronesis cannot lead to a virtuous action. Such action may be either immoral or amoral in terms of virtue ethics, though might be considered ethical in consequentialist or deontological frameworks (if it has a good outcome or conforms to rules).

Action without phronesis or reflection may be part of a larger virtuous activity. A person may, following reflection, decide to train their dog for virtuous reasons (to enable it to thrive in human society), but the behavioural training is not in itself a virtuous activity – we do not find the behaviour of a trained dog morally praiseworthy, though we might admire their skill. However, the training is part of a wider package of activity that is driven by the virtues of the owner, and which could be seen to be 'good'.

Behaving in a virtuous and reflective manner does not necessarily lead to good outcomes. This may be the result of contingency (a virtuous physician who saved Adolf Hitler's life during World War I could not predict, nor be responsible for, the long term outcomes of their action). In addition, humans are fallible with incomplete knowledge and may make errors in judgment. Finally, the outcome may be mixed, good for some and bad for others; a manager may need to make people redundant to save the company. However, when decisions are taken in a virtuous manner then they will, in general, serve the end of human flourishing.

Implications for coaching

There are several practical implications of the link between phronesis and reflection for coaches. The first is that, as discussed above, the development of character, and especially an understanding of how to moderate and balance one's virtues to achieve one's *telos*, is necessary for *eudaimonia*, or flourishing. An ability to act with phronesis can result in flourishing and 'good' outcomes, where 'good' encompasses and aligns both moral and other outcomes. This is true for both coaches and for their clients and would seem to be at the heart of what much coaching is there to achieve. This suggests that coaching could pay greater attention to the development of character (coaching for character), something that has long been recognised in the field of sports (e.g. Feltz, Chase, Moritz, & Sullivan, 1999; Hardman, Jones, & Jones, 2010; Bolter & Weiss, 2012; Boardley, 2018). The self-assessment of character strengths in positive psychology coaching does increase self-awareness of one's character (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), but it does not emphasis the development of virtues or the orchestration of them with phronesis (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006).

The moderation of virtues in the context is an important skill. If one takes the example of courage, then a healthcare worker will express that virtue differently from a soldier (Oakley & Cocking, 2001). However, the immediate context is also important; what may be foolhardy behaviour for a nurse in

normal circumstances may be courageous behaviour in the face of a novel pandemic, inadequate personal protective equipment and patients who need care. Phronesis allows an individual to regulate, in a conscious way, their virtues in such a context and role specific manner.

The second application is to provide coaches and their clients with an approach to ethical dilemmas. Clients face ethical dilemmas in their decision making, in a manner that will be dependent on their home or work context. Coaches need to support their clients through such decision making, and also face ethical dilemmas of their own (Iordanou, Hawley, & Iordanou, 2016). Professional guidelines help in decision making, for example the Global Code for Ethics for coaches (EMCC, 2021). However, these guidelines are largely deontological or principle based (often relying on consequentialist arguments), and so do not provide help when there is conflict between different aspects of the guidelines or when the issue falls outside the guidelines.

The clash of different 'rules' can put a coach in an invidious position, not knowing which is the right one to follow (Turner & Woods, 2015). Research indicates that when such clashes occur, different coaches (even experience coach supervisors) will not agree as to what the right thing to do, or how to interpret the professional guidelines (Turner & Passmore, 2018). While consistency in ethical decision making is not always possible (Friesen, Yusof, & Sheehan, 2019), the lack of consistency and understanding is concerning. It seems probable that coaches (and supervisors) use their intuition in such dilemmas and lack a decision making framework or other tools needed (Passmore, 2009; Turner & Passmore, 2018). A further study has shown that ethical decision making by coaches incorporates many elements, and suggested that a framework would be useful, as would building the ethical maturity and capabilities of coaches (Duffy & Passmore, 2010; Iordanou & Williams, 2017).

The deliberate development of phronesis can be used to develop the ability of professions to ethically reason and deliberate. In the medical world there has been, over the years, a proliferation of rules, regulations and guidelines designed to ensure that doctors behave correctly (Upshur, 2014). More recently there has been an increased emphasis on the role of phronesis in medical ethical decision making, and a move to develop doctors' ability to use phronesis in their professional activity (Arthur et al., 2015; Malik et al., 2020; Conroy et al., 2021). Similar approaches are being taken in other disparate professions, including business management and engineering (e.g. Stovall, 2011; Akrivou & Scalzo, 2020; Kristjánsson, 2021). Reflection using phronesis,

either self or as part of coaching supervision, can help build the ethical maturity needed by coaches to make wise ethical decisions.

Coaches can also help their clients develop the same ability to use phronesis and so make 'good' decisions that enable them to flourish.These applications have implications for how coaches are trained and educated. This is not the place to discuss how best to develop an approach to developing virtue-based thinking. In brief, others have developed theory-centred, exemplar-centred and concept centred approaches in courses and workshops in the context of scientific research (Pennock & O'Rourke, 2017), and similar work has been developed in clinical decision making (Malik et al., 2020). These approaches could be used for training coaches and others involved in enabling behaviour change to improve their ability to use phronesis in reflection.

Conclusion

Phronesis is the key virtue in directing human behaviour. It is a form of reflection and is essential for people to make morally good decisions, leading to good actions. Coaches should therefore engage with phronesis in reflection to help their clients and develop their abilities to reflect. They should consider how to develop phronesis in themselves and their clients.

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Author contact
Andrew J.T. George
andrew@ajtg.co.uk

Andrew is Professor Emeritus in Immunology at Imperial College London and Brunel University London. He holds a MA from the University of Cambridge, a PhD from Southampton and a DSc from Imperial College London. He is currently an MSc student at Henley Business School. Andrew is an executive coach (Senior Practitioner of the EMCC) and holds non-executive roles in the NHS, charity and education sector. He chaired the national committee overseeing research ethics in the NHS and was awarded an MBE for his work in research ethics. For full biography see: ajtg.co.uk