Coaching from a Place of Grounded Uncertainty: Richard Rorty's Neo-Pragmatism and the ICF's Core Competency Model

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Abstract

The ICF's Core Competency model defines coaching behaviorally but does not offer a coherent philosophy of coaching. In this paper, I argue that a philosophy of coaching is useful for coaches as it allows them to go beyond simply 'behaving' as a coach to being actively grounded as a coach. I then present Richard Rorty's neo-pragmatism as a philosophy that aligns with the ICF's core competency model and argue that an understanding of neo-pragmatism is useful to coaches as it allows them to coach from a place of 'grounded uncertainty'.

Key Words: Neo-pragmatism, ICF core competency model, philosophy of coaching, grounded uncertainty, vertical development

Introduction

Although the International Coaching Federation (ICF) claims that it "continues to lead the way in developing a definition and philosophy of coaching" (ICF Ethics, 2022) there is no explicit statement of a coaching philosophy in any of its publicly facing documents at this time (October 2022). The closest thing to a coaching philosophy on the ICF website is the assertion that:

> ICF defines coaching as partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximise their personal and professional potential. The process of coaching often unlocks previously untapped sources of imagination, productivity, and leadership. (ICF, 2022).

There is, however, a former coaching "philosophy" published by the ICF that continues to be cited on several ICF chapter websites as well as by individual certified coaches on their websites. It reads:

> The International Coach Federation adheres to a form of coaching that honors the client as the expert in his/her life and work, and believes that every client is creative, resourceful, and whole. Standing on this foundation, the coach's responsibility is to:

- Discover, clarify, and align with what the client wants to achieve
- Encourage client self-discovery
- Elicit client-generated solutions and strategies
- Hold the client responsible and accountable (ICF Washington, 2022).

In support of this "philosophy," the ICF researches, publishes, and promotes core competencies (ICF Core Competencies, 2019), which in turn reference a code of ethics (ICF Code of Ethics, 2022) and core values (ICF Core Values, 2022).

In this paper, I attempt to connect the ICF's coaching "philosophy" to philosophy more broadly understood – which is to say, philosophy that sits recognizably within the Western philosophical tradition as it has been practiced since Ancient Greek times. The purpose of doing so is to give coach practitioners the intellectual ground for them to practice coaching that aligns with the ICF core competency model while at the same time developing a deeper understanding of and sensitivity to the essential beliefs that might support the behaviors identified in the model. This is something of a tall order as the core competency model has not been validated empirically, using peer reviewed studies, as Richard Boyatzis (2022, 28:00) has pointed out. Nevertheless, the particular philosophy that I argue is best suited to supporting the ICF's core competency model renders this critique less damning than it might otherwise be, given that empirical studies within this philosophy are understood as not the only, nor even the primary, means of establishing authority for the core competency model, or anything else for that matter.

In this paper, then, I begin by reviewing the ICF's core competencies to establish a clearer understanding of what, behaviorally, coaching looks like from an ICF perspective. I then argue that having a conceptual framework to ground these competencies is useful for coach practitioners, insofar as it allows them to go beyond simply 'behaving' as a coach to actively being a coach, with a philosophy to back up that way of being. I then present neo-pragmatism, as articulated most clearly and convincingly by Richard Rorty in his 1989 book *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, as a philosophy that aligns with the ICF's core competency model and argue that an understanding of neo-pragmatism helps coaches coach from a place of "grounded uncertainty" which is, pragmatically speaking, useful given the current challenges we are facing both individually and collectively.

What does coaching look like from an ICF perspective?

The heading of this section captures the first and perhaps most important thing to note about ICF coaching – that it is defined in observable terms. There are good reasons for why this is the case. Insofar as the ICF is a global professional association that is primarily in the business of supporting coaches, through credentialing of individual coaches and accreditation of coach training and education programs, it needs an objective enough approach to establish the effectiveness of an individual coach or coach training organization. It can only do this through accessible, measurable markers, and an enormous amount of time and effort has been expended on identifying exactly what these markers should be and how they might be taught and assessed. The only exception to this approach is the ICF Credentialing Exam (previously the Coach Knowledge Assessment or CKA) that measures "a coach's knowledge of and ability to apply the ICF definition of coaching, the updated Core Competencies, and the ICF Code of Ethics against a predetermined standard." In other words, the Credentialing Exam measures a coach's understanding directly, while other forms of assessment, most notably recordings of live coaching sessions, measure only behavior in a real-world coaching session.

So, what behaviors are measured? At the highest level (drawn from the recently released Minimum Skills Requirements for MCC Credential, 2022), they can be summarized as:

- Coach adheres to the ICF Code of Ethics

- Coach stays in the role of coach i.e. doesn't do consulting, therapy, teaching etc.

- Coach *partners* with the client, with the client in the driver's seat at all times

- Coach establishes and maintains flexible agreements

- Coach is collaborative, curious, sensitive, and responsive to the whole person of the client, including their emotions, context and identity

- Coach explores client language, stories and metaphors

- Coach is concise and precise and leverages silence

- Coach challenges and fosters awareness

- Coach encourages learning and action based on learning

Although many of these behavioral markers point to inner qualities of the coach (i.e. sensitive, responsive) these are measurable insofar as particular exchanges in a recorded coaching conversation can be pointed to as evidence that the coach is demonstrating these qualities.

If one accepts these behavioral markers as perhaps less than ideal but a necessary compromise for the sake of the ICF doing what it needs to do (i.e. credentialing coaches and accrediting programs in a fair and transparent way through direct observation), the question then becomes what, if any, philosophy of coaching is contained within these behavioral markers or is derivable from them. But before we address that question and go looking for a coaching philosophy that aligns with the ICF's core competency model, I would like to address the question of why a philosophy of coaching is even worth having. What purpose does it serve?

The purpose of a coaching philosophy

For a coaching philosophy to be worth anything it needs to do something. And what philosophy has traditionally done is ground our thinking, feeling and action in a well thought through, coherent belief system that helps us solve the problems we need to solve.

Being able to clearly articulate and critique what we believe, individually and collectively, is not only the means by which we gain an understanding of ourselves, especially in a world that is increasingly complex, pluralistic and diverse, but also the means by which we develop new conceptions of what it means to be human. As Robert Solomon and Kathleen Higgins (2013), in the introduction to their book *The Big Questions*, put it:

> Ultimately, what makes an understanding of concepts and conceptual frameworks so
> important and rewarding is the fact that in understanding them, we are also in the process
> of creating them, and in so doing enriching them, developing them, solidifying them, and
> giving new understanding and clarity to our everyday lives. (pp. 12-13)

In other words, through actively doing philosophy we work through the implications and complications in our belief systems, so they become more capable of solving the problems we, as unique individuals, and societally, need them to solve.

Doing philosophy then begins with "stating, as clearly and as convincingly as possible, what we believe and what we believe in" (Solomon & Higgins, 2013, p. 3). But because human beings have been doing philosophy since Ancient Greek times (and likely long before,

although we have no record of this), doing philosophy doesn't end there. Just as any coach would be foolish not to inquire into and learn from other coaches (and other related professionals) who have come before, so anyone doing philosophy would be foolish not to inquire into and learn from what philosophers in the past have learned. For this reason, doing philosophy often involves drawing on, making connections with and/or comparing and contrasting one's own articulations and arguments with those of the philosophers of the past – which is why if you read philosophy today you will see many references to Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Nietzsche, Saint Augustine and other "great philosophers."

If we apply these same general principles of philosophy to the world of coaching, we can say that *a coaching philosophy is the active process of articulating and challenging our beliefs about coaching, which enriches, develops and solidifies our understanding of how to think, feel and act as coaches*. When this is done in an informed, rigorous way, the problem solved is one faced by many coaches, which is most succinctly expressed as "How do I coach in a way that makes sense to me?"

A Coaching Philosophy Aligned with the ICF Core Competency Model

With this understanding of what a coaching philosophy is and what it can do for us in place, I'd like to turn now briefly to what the minimum requirements of a coaching philosophy aligned with the ICF core competency model would be. Here I will draw on the summary description of the ICF's core competency model included at the beginning of this paper.

Firstly, it would have at its heart the idea that each individual is the expert in their own life and work, that they are creative, resourceful, and whole, and that they can reasonably expect their coach to be resolutely focused on what they and they alone want to achieve. In other words, it would be a coaching philosophy firmly rooted in individualism. (I am restricting myself in this paper to the ICF's Core Competency model, which is designed primarily for one-on-one coaching. The ICF's Team Coaching Competencies have a more systemic focus.)

Secondly, it would emphasize partnership, collaboration, flexibility, curiosity, sensitivity, responsiveness, context, and identity – in short, a coaching relationship grounded in respect for the other.

Thirdly, it would emphasize the role of language (including stories and metaphors) in a client's sense of themselves.

And lastly, it would support and encourage learning, along with action based on that learning.

It may seem that I am setting myself up for the quite bizarre project of reverse engineering a coaching philosophy to fit a pre-existing conception of coaching, which is not something I or any philosophically-trained person with any integrity would recommend. But if we zoom out for a moment, and consider the ICF in its historical and cultural moment, it is not difficult to see that it was likely influenced by the time and place within which it arose, namely the United States in the late 1990s, a time and place where a particular philosophical school was becoming increasingly dominant and exerting a strong influence, both inside and outside the Academy. So, it is to that moment, and that philosophical school, that I now turn,

to see if the various requirements I have established for a coaching philosophy aligned with the ICF core competency model can be met with a pre-existing, recognized philosophy.

Richard Rorty's Neo-Pragmatism

Tatiana Bachkirova and Simon Borrington, in their 2019 paper 'Old wine in new bottles,' make a strong case that the development of coaching as an academic discipline would benefit from adopting philosophical pragmatism as an overarching theoretical framework. I agree with this claim, and at the same time would like to do two things: 1) put more flesh on the bone of what philosophical pragmatism is, and what strand of philosophical pragmatism in particular is best suited to supporting the development of coaching as an academic discipline; and 2) argue that not only the academic discipline of coaching stands to benefit from adopting philosophical pragmatism but also individual coaches.

Pragmatism as a philosophical tradition dates back to the 1870s in the United States. By the time the ICF was inaugurated in 1995, a particular strand of this tradition, one that responded to many of the developments in 20th century philosophy, especially what has come to be known as the 'linguistic turn" in the philosophy of Frege and Wittgenstein, had become dominant in both universities and the public imagination. The leading advocate of this strand, which came to be known as 'neo-pragmatism,' was the philosopher Richard Rorty.

Rorty first introduced neo-pragmatism in his 1979 book *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*. The book was intended as a contribution to academic philosophy, while at the same time being antagonistic to academic philosophy insofar as it claimed most philosophical problems were pseudo-problems, problems that could be better resolved by looking at the language within which they were couched than at the problems themselves. This emphasis on language led the book to be better received in departments of literature than philosophy, and his later articulation, in the 1989 book *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, was aimed at a more general audience. It is from this work, primarily, that I draw in summarizing what I see as the essence of Rorty's neo-pragmatism. In the summary below I have resisted the impulse to make explicit where I see connections to coaching, choosing instead to present 'pure' neo-pragmatism first, before looking at coaching through the lens of neo-pragmatism in the next section.

In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* Rorty advocates for a world where we "no longer worship anything, where we treat nothing as a quasi-divinity, where we treat everything - our language, our conscience, our community - as a product of time and chance" (Rorty, 1989, p. 22). De-divinizing our worldviews in this way enables us to find meaning not in God or Truth, but in "finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings" (p. 45). This, he claims, increases our chances of developing rich idiosyncratic personal narratives that further our individual and collective growth.

On the surface, this sounds like relativism – the belief that your truth, my truth, anyone else's truth is equally valid. But Rorty is not a relativist – or at least not a knee-jerk one – because his claim is not that there is no such thing as truth. Rather, he claims truth is simply redundant - it is no longer useful or interesting - it is "just the name of a property which all true statements share" (Rorty, 1982, p. xiii). He reaches this conclusion by arguing that truth is necessarily dependent on language, a man-made tool, and as such cannot exist "out there." Reality is always mediated by our descriptions of reality, so that while "the world is out there ... descriptions of the world are not" (Rorty, 1989, p. 5). Or, as Elliot Eisner puts it

> To know that we have a correspondence between our views [descriptions in Rorty's terms]
> of reality and reality itself, we would need to know two things. We would need to know
> reality, as well as our views of it. But if we knew reality as it really is, we would not need
> to have a view of it. Conversely, since we cannot have knowledge of reality as it is, we
> cannot know if our view corresponds to it. (Eisner, 1991, p. 44).

We do, nonetheless, describe the world, and some descriptions seem to us more accurate than others. A schizophrenic describing the world in terms of alien voices out to destroy him is likely to be seen as less accurate in his descriptions than a psychoanalyst describing the same phenomenon in terms of conscious and unconscious drives, but when faced with a multitude of socially legitimate descriptions - scientific versus religious descriptions, for instance - how do we decide which better represents reality? Rorty claims we can't, because "the world does not speak. Only we do" (Rorty, 1989, p. 6). While our descriptions appear to accurately describe the world, intellectual history shows new descriptions are inevitably stopgaps in a larger process of description and re-description. Moreover, new descriptions are not rationally chosen - their validity depends on their ability to offer interesting, novel, or useful ways of understanding ourselves and the world around us. The history of ideas, then, according to Rorty, is "a history of increasingly useful metaphors rather than of increasing understanding of how things really are" (p. 9).

When we conceive of our intellectual history in this way, as a set of increasingly useful metaphors, rather than a gradual discovery of the way the world really is, truth becomes simply that which members of a society believe, following a free and open dialogue. This pragmatic view of truth suggests the more we break down barriers to free and open dialogue the more "truly" we will live. Thus, a culture in which "neither the priests nor the physicists nor the poets nor the Party were thought of as more 'rational', or more 'scientific' or 'deeper' than one another" (Rorty, 1982, p. xxxviii) is one where no authoritative narratives inhibit new, idiosyncratic, and potentially valuable ones from emerging.

What Rorty proposes, then, is a cultural shift as significant in scope as the Enlightenment shift from a religious to a secular culture. Just as the priest arbitrated between God and His people in a religious culture, so the philosopher arbitrates between Truth and truth claims in a secular culture. Jettisoning the idea of reality as distinct from our descriptions of it, the philosopher in a pragmatic culture loses his authority in much the same way the role of the priest was diminished in the shift from a religious to a secular culture.

The question then becomes how we might choose between a pragmatic or secular culture. A secular culture assumes there is something to be true to - our inner nature, or the way the world is. A pragmatic culture claims we are nothing other than what we describe ourselves to be. By questioning the notion of truth-as-correspondence the pragmatist has robbed us of any shared criteria by which we might choose one form of life over another. Instead of a rational choice, then, we are left with what Rorty deems a spiritual choice, a choice between "alternative self images" (p. xliv) - to believe in Truth independent of our descriptions of it, or to be "alone, merely finite, with no links to something Beyond" (pp. xlii-xliii).

To refuse to believe in something Beyond - no God, no Truth, no Human Nature - seems on the surface to be an inherently unspiritual position to take, given that historically we have understood spirituality to be premised on the idea of a consciousness that transcends our own (a spiritual 'realm'). But in religious times we couldn't imagine a non-religious spirituality - the idea of spirituality existing apart from religion seemed incomprehensible. Might it not be possible, Rorty asks, for a spirituality to exist independently of something

larger than us - to locate our spirituality in a commitment to our own self-creation, and to derive our meaning solely from interactions with other self-creating human beings.
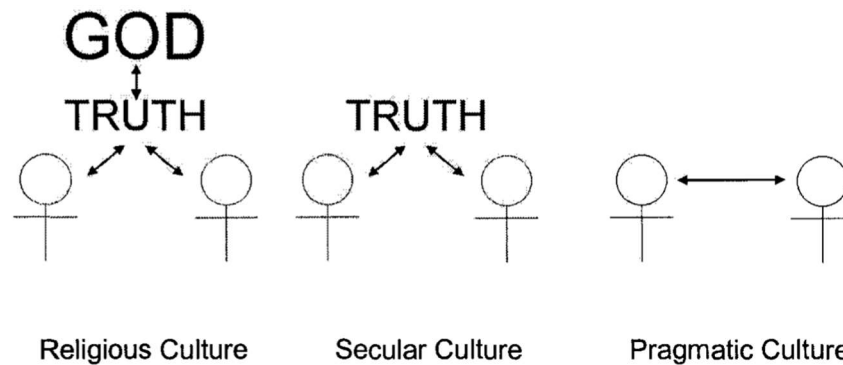
Rorty believes we are reluctant to take this step because we fear that without God, Truth, or Nature to keep us in check we will destroy the planet and ourselves. If there is nothing beyond us capable of conferring value – if Life has value only insofar as we give it value – the moral authority of political and ecological arguments that emphasize *inherent* human rights and the *inherent* value of diversity is lost. This in turn has implications for our commitment to others. Without a belief in the inherent wrongness of murder, for instance, don't we risk society descending into anarchy? Rorty argues no, because while the decline of religious faith prompted a similar fear - that without the moral motivation of the afterlife the social fabric of society would disintegrate - the promise of reward in the afterlife was transferred to a promise of reward in this life. In a pragmatic culture, similarly, intrinsic reward for living in accord with human nature will be replaced by extrinsic reward for living in accord with others.

In a pragmatic culture, then, what unites human beings is not a common truth or a common goal but a "common selfish hope" (Rorty, 1989, p. 92) – the hope that the unique, idiosyncratic descriptions each of us has created for ourselves will not be destroyed. Because there is no human purpose outside of our descriptions of the world (i.e. no God, Nature or Truth that confers inherent value upon us), the best we can do to live purposeful lives is to describe ourselves in our own terms, with a new description that "makes possible, for the first time, a formulation of its own purpose" (p. 13). People who describe themselves with a unique and distinct vocabulary are able to become who they truly are, whereas those who accept somebody else's description of themselves are simply a copy of those whose language they are using. Only by telling the story of how I came to be in a language of my own making do I realize the full possibility of my humanity.

For me to be truly myself, then, I need to create myself more than discover myself. I need to find distinctive words to describe myself - words or forms not previously used. By escaping from the descriptions foisted upon me, I give birth to myself and alleviate the anxiety of dying in a world not of my own making. My self-respect, in this model, is based not on my ability to live up to universal standards, but on my ability to break free of the defining features of my contingent and idiosyncratic past. Yet this project of self-creation is doomed from the outset because any re-description of myself, however novel or original, will necessarily rely on prior descriptions. A language which was "all metaphor" would be a language which had no use, hence not a language but just "babble" (Rorty, 1989, p. 41). Moreover, the language we use to describe ourselves must intersect with the language of others if we are to have any meaningful relationship to others. We exist within a web of relations, and just as a poem is dependent on a reader to give it meaning, so a created self

relies on others to give it meaning. Success, therefore, in Rorty's terms, is to re-describe the past in such a way that what was once marginal, metaphoric, and descriptive appears to future generations as literal, obvious, and true.

Rorty sees a revised role for philosophy in this process of self-creation. When it is freed from its role as arbiter of moral truth and underwriter of social organization in a secular culture, it can serve as a means to "private perfection" (Rorty, 1989, p. 96) in a pragmatic culture. Philosophy becomes a "way of coping", helping us transcend our contingency by relegating the past to the role of servant rather than master. Through philosophy we develop our own unique "final vocabulary" so we can say, at Life's end, "Thus I willed it."

Marcel Proust, the author of the six-volume fictional autobiography *In search of lost time* (2003), is for Rorty an exemplar of self-creation. Caring not about how he looked to the universe but only about how he looked to himself, Rorty claims, Proust freed himself from the constraints imposed on him by others' descriptions.

> His method of freeing himself from those people [friends and family] - of becoming autonomous - was to redescribe the people who had described him ... Proust became autonomous by explaining to himself why the others were no authorities, but simply fellow contingencies. He redescribed them as being as much a product of others' attitudes toward them as Proust himself was a product of their attitudes toward him ... This feat enabled him to relinquish the very idea of authority, and with it the idea that there is a privileged perspective from which he, or anyone else, is to be described. (Rorty, 1989, pp. 102-103)

Proust created a self, for himself, and in so doing became the person he wanted to be. He transcended barriers to personal meaning-making and defied narrative inhibitions. This empowerment was gained not at the expense of others, nor did it make him an authority on others. He simply "turned other people from his judges into his fellow sufferers, and thus succeeded in creating the taste by which he judged himself" (p. 103).

What Rorty ultimately advocates, then, is the proliferation of new vocabularies that enhance our capacity for self-creation. By calling into question dominant vocabularies and offering different and potentially interesting alternatives, we expand the realm of human possibility. We do this not by committing to abstract entities like God, Truth or Nature but by pursuing creativity for creativity's sake, growth for growth's sake, keeping the conversation going wherever it may lead. Only by decrying "the very notion of having a view, while avoiding having a view about having views" (p. 371) are we able to avoid the trap of thinking that we know ourselves, or anything else for that matter, outside of wholly optional descriptions.

Neo-Pragmatism as Coaching Philosophy

In the previous section I summarized in some detail Rorty's neo-pragmatism, without making explicit the connection between neo-pragmatism and the ICF's core competency model. In this section I show how neo-pragmatism aligns with and supports the ICF core competency model insofar as they both emphasize growth for growth's sake, self-creation, and a resistance to the constraints imposed by theories (descriptions in Rorty's terms) that limit the emergence of new, more personal and idiosyncratic narratives (re-descriptions in Rorty's terms) that open up new possibilities and purposes, not just for individuals but for larger collectives also.

One of the things that is most evident, even from a cursory review of the ICF's core competencies, is the lack of any foundational theory. Whereas other modalities are defined by their theoretical orientation, coaching is resolutely ecumenical with respect to theory, which is why individual practitioners and coaching schools have drawn on such a wide range of often competing theoretical perspectives while still retaining their association with the ICF and the core competency model. This lack of theoretical commitment by the ICF is not only pragmatic in the colloquial sense of the term (i.e. it's useful, it works, it's fit for purpose), but also clearly aligns with the neo-pragmatist emphasis on non-foundationalism.

Another consistent emphasis in the Core Competencies is partnership, with the word 'Partners with the client' appearing 13 times in the eight core competencies i.e. 3.8: "Partners with the client to define or reconfirm measures of success." This emphasis on partnership suggests a strong commitment to respecting the other in the coaching dialogue. The client is in the driver's seat at all times, yes … and the coach is authorized to hold the client to a coaching process (CC 3.1: "explain what coaching is and is not"), to use "awareness of self and one's intuition to benefit clients," (CC 2.5) to challenge the client "as a way to evoke awareness or insight" (CC 7.2) and to share "observations, insights and feelings, without attachment, that have the potential to create new learning for the client" (CC 7.11). In other words, the coach is not a doormat to the client, but an equal partner in a democratic dialogue with clear agreements and structures in place that facilitate success for both parties to the relationship. This emphasis on democratic dialogue aligns with the neo-pragmatist emphasis on free and open dialogue as the means by which we become more truly ourselves, with expertise, other than process expertise, seen more as a limiter than a contributor to personal realization and liberation. It also aligns with the neo-pragmatist emphasis on unmediated human relationship, where the primary commitment is to self-realization (private perfection in Rorty's terms) through ongoing dialogue between equally self-creating individuals.

The core competencies also value staying curious about the client's words, body language, context and identity, while acknowledging and respecting the client's unique talents and insights. They explicitly value "not knowing" (5.5: "Is comfortable working in a space of not knowing"), which aligns with the neo-pragmatist resistance to authoritative narratives that inhibit new, idiosyncratic and potentially valuable ones from emerging. Good coaches, the core competencies seem to suggest, are in an almost perpetual state of doubt about what they think they may know about the client – because ultimately it is what clients think and know about themselves that matters. The coach's thinking is seen more as a source of possible distortion and interference in the client's thinking, than as a source of authoritative and expert interpretation, because, as neo-pragmatism asserts, it is only by telling the story of how I came to be *in a language of my own making* that I realize my full potential. This coaching mindset also aligns with neo-pragmatism's commitment to decry "the very notion of having a view, while avoiding having a view about having views" (Rorty, 1989, p. 371) – an almost impossible perspective to maintain, yet one coaches should, in my opinion, assiduously aspire to (I am aware, of course, of the irony here – that I am strongly advocating for the view that coaches should decry the notion of having a view.)

Lastly, the core competencies situate clients as experts in their own lives and as creative, resourceful and whole – in other words, capable of freely choosing, without direction from the coach, what they want to focus on and who, ultimately, they want to be in and through the coaching. This 'self-directed in all aspects' emphasis in coaching differs from other modalities that have more foundational commitments, most notably psychotherapy, which almost by definition has a pre-existing commitment to mental health

before any individual client is even addressed by any particular psychotherapist. Coaches, in contrast, work in a wide variety of niches, each with their own individual intended outcomes, with coaching clients freely choosing between them, and even once coach and client have structured an engagement it is the client who is called to identify their goals for the engagement as a whole and each individual session. This aligns with what the neo-pragmatist identifies as a spiritual, more than a rational choice – a choice between alternative self-images, negotiated between two self-creating human beings, in contrast to a choice between foundational binaries i.e. mental health vs. mental illness. (It could be argued that the ICF's emphasis on maximizing "personal and professional potential" (ICF, 2022) is an equivalent foundational binary, but in contrast to the mental health/illness distinction, which is buttressed by over a century of institutionalized discourse, there is no research that can be invoked to determine whether or not any one particular individual is or is not maximizing their potential. In other words, coaching is driven more by a subjective experience than an objective interpretation or diagnosis.)

So far in this section I have highlighted the compatibility between Rorty's neo-pragmatism and the ICF's core competency model. In the remainder of this section, though, I'd like to address some of the ways neo-pragmatism and the core competency model don't align – at least not on the surface. To do so, I will focus on the ICF Code of Ethics and Core Values, which are part and parcel of the core competency model because competency 1.4 stipulates that an ICF certified coach must abide by the ICF Code of Ethics and uphold the Core Values. It is to these documents that I now turn, looking to see to what extent they align or fail to align with Rorty's neo-pragmatism.

Before looking at the detail contained in these documents, I'd like to address what appears to be a misalignment straight off the bat, given that Ethics and Values already suggest a foundation that neo-pragmatism explicitly rejects. Yet a closer look at neo-pragmatism reveals a dependency on, if not the philosophy of liberal democracy, then at least the institutions of liberal democracy. Rorty was writing at a time when these institutions, which include but are certainly not limited to the democratically-elected governments of most Western nations, global organizations committed to upholding the values of democracy, such as the United Nations, as well as the myriad institutes of higher learning around the world that adhere to, research, teach and promote democratic values, were reasonably considered inviolable. Unfortunately, recent history, particularly in the US, has led us to be more circumspect about the resilience of liberal democracy, but for our purposes it is enough to say that neo-pragmatism rests on an assumption of a larger context in which free and open dialogue is valued and protected. Indeed, it is only with this assumption in place that non-foundationalism makes sense. Just as training wheels are necessary only until such time as you can ride a bike without them, so foundations are necessary only until they can be safely and reasonably assumed. In other words, Rorty's philosophy is postmodern, sitting atop an assumption of democratic values embedded in modernist institutions.

In much the same way, the core competencies need the Code of Ethics and Core Values to ground their lack of philosophical and/or theoretical commitment. Without such a ground, the core competencies remain untethered to anything that can give them meaning, including the very institution that produces them (in the preamble to the Code of Ethics this is made explicit: "The ICF Code of Ethics serves to uphold the integrity of ICF.") Much of the Code of Ethics consists of standards that adhere closely to what can still today be reasonably assumed in a functional democracy, with honesty, transparency, fairness and non-oppression

being the guiding principles. This emphasis is made explicit in the Core Values of "Professionalism, Collaboration, Humanity and Equity."

The extent to which even these more foundational aspects of the ICF's core competency model align with neo-pragmatism is perhaps best illustrated by seeing how conversational norms derived directly from neo-pragmatism align with those specified in the ICF's Code of Ethics and Core Values documents. To illustrate this, I will reverse the flow of my argument in this closing section, asking what conversational norms are embedded in Rorty's neo-pragmatism and how they align with ICF's core competencies.

Happily, I do not have to do the work of deriving conversational norms from Rorty's philosophy myself. In 1996, Robert Nash, a philosopher of education and professor in the College of Education and Social Services at the University of Vermont, who so far as I'm aware had, and very possibly still has, no knowledge of coaching and no connection to the ICF (which was only founded in 1995 anyway), attached a memo to the syllabus that he hands out to students at the beginning of each semester. The memo described the main components of what he called a 'moral conversation,' a particular type of conversation that recognized not just what was being talked about but *how* that 'what' was being discussed. In developing this document, he drew heavily on the work of Richard Rorty, articulating what he termed "pivotal postmodern virtues" (Nash, 1997, p. 176). These included:

> a sensitivity to the postmodern realities of incommensurability, indeterminacy, and nonfoundationalism; dialectical awareness; empathy; hermeneutical sensitivity; openness to alterity; respect for plurality; a sense of irony and humor; a commitment to civility; a capacity for fairness and charity; compassion in the presence of suffering, with an antipathy toward violence; and humility in the face of shifting and elusive conceptions of reality, goodness and truth. (Nash, 1997, p. 11)

In addition, he claimed a moral conversation:

- *Does not privilege any one moral vocabulary over any other*. No moral vocabulary can be final or "highest". By comparing and contrasting incommensurable moral vocabularies, a consensual framework for negotiating competing claims may emerge.

- *Is free of manipulation and domination*. There can be no presumption in advance as to what is true or good. Conversation must be free flowing, with everything up for negotiation and discussion. The purpose of moral conversation is not to assert a moral viewpoint or exact agreement - it is to develop "mutuality and self-criticism in order for personal transformation to occur" (Nash, 1997, p. 178) - while accepting transformation may not occur and not all truth claims may be reconcilable.

- *Is hermeneutically aware*, allowing us to get beyond others' and our own interpretations. Hermeneutical sensitivity "recognizes and respects the principle that reality is endlessly interpretable" (p. 179). Only by sharing "partial perspectives" (p. 179) can we articulate a common reality and develop common goals.

- *Is conducted in a spirit of trust and optimism*, rather than suspicion (p. 180)

Nash believes that by engaging in moral conversation of this kind we are more likely to understand each other and develop original and novel ways of describing ourselves and the world. Moral conversation allows us to extend our imaginations and poeticize life in original ways. These private idiosyncratic fantasies, when they "just happen to catch on with other

people" (Rorty, 1989, p. 37), become the mainstream philosophies and poetic realities of tomorrow.

Coaching conversations at their best, I believe, are like Nash's moral conversations – open spaces that open up new ways of being and doing human. The ICF's core competency model attempts to codify, as best it can when focused resolutely on measurable behavior as opposed to internal states, the values and principles supportive of moral conversation. A deeper understanding of postmodern pragmatist philosophy can support coaches in the integration of these values and principles, leading to a more grounded coach approach. And because it is in the nature of neo-pragmatism to dwell in what the English poet John Keats called 'negative capability,' to resist false certainties and maybe even celebrate uncertainty, it opens up a space for grounded uncertainty. While this may seem like an oxymoron – groundedness implies foundations, solidity, reliability – it is aligned with the ironies that are at the heart of neo-pragmatism and on which it relies.

In a world that is increasingly polarized, where certainties abound with very little incontrovertible evidence to support them, we would do well to recognize and embrace the multiplicity of equally viable perspectives that surround us, and how they might come together to create solutions that are desperately needed and currently in short supply. I believe that coaches armed with a neo-pragmatist philosophy and a solid understanding of the ICF's core competency model, who can offer their clients the gift of grounded uncertainty, are well placed to drive this change.

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