

Why Coaching Needs Real Intelligence, Not Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract

The movement of AI into the coaching arena continues to be steady and confident, meeting only rare and timid resistance. The progress of this movement can be explained by decades of technological advances, the entrepreneurial attitude of AI developers, and the inherent peculiarities of the coaching business. The voices of caution are too quiet in ‘the noise of progress’. However, there are important reasons for coaching communities to be apprehensive about the ways this movement could change coaching as a service and what this means for all involved. In this paper, I address potential problematic issues with the AI revolution in the context of a multitude of conceptual holes in coaching as a profession. I argue that dehumanising coaching under the guise of ‘enhancement by AI’ undermines human intelligence, which is desperately needed while the discipline of organisational coaching remains in its early stages of development.

Keywords: human intelligence, artificial intelligence, organisational coaching

Introduction

I have argued elsewhere that the field of organisational coaching is full of conceptual holes (Bachkirova, 2024). By ‘conceptual holes’ I mean those important characteristics of our service that should be identified, named, agreed upon and committed to. As things stand, this is far from being the case and evidence of this can be found in many relevant sources in the conceptual literature of coaching (e.g., Garvey, Stokes & Megginson, 2010; Cavanagh, 2016; Bachkirova & Kaufman, 2009). Here are the examples of how these conceptual holes manifest in organisational coaching:

- We avoid clarity about who the main recipient of organisational coaching is
- We are not specific about the purpose of our service that is commensurable to the means available to us
- We are not sufficiently clear about how our offer is different from other professional services, e.g., training, consultancy, therapy, AI coaching
- We do not own the serious ethical implications of our ‘unique set up’
- We cannot provide clear guidance to less experienced coaches in terms of positioning their service in organisations in ethical ways
- As we are not clear about what we offer, we cannot be clear how to evaluate the quality of our service

In these conceptual ‘muddy waters’ developers and enthusiasts of digital revolution are free to claim anything, from small and potentially useful technological adjustments to pronouncing human coaching fully replaceable by AI chatbots. Without the industry agreeing what the essential characteristics of organisational coaching are, it is impossible to compare it with ‘AI coaching’ and thus to explore if these strong claims have any legitimacy. To deal with the task of comparing human and AI coaching, in a recent paper (Bachkirova & Kemp, 2024) we have initiated a conversation by proposing six essential characteristics of organisational coaching and have argued that stand-alone AI coaching does not meet any of these criteria. As a result, we argued that AI intervention cannot be called coaching and suggested instead something like ‘digitally assisted self-coaching’ as being more appropriate.

In this paper, I am not arguing against any further development of AI ‘in coaching’ as such, as AI could be a useful developmental device in the same way as working with a reflective diary can be useful. My main point is that we should not pretend that it is coaching as we know it – which is to say, as an interpersonal practice. There is no reason to think that AI could not be used as a supplement to human coaching, but as things stand it cannot, in principle, provide a stand-alone coaching service that is equivalent to human coaching. If we continue to do this pretending, we could pay a high price and undermine the potential of our profession to play an important role in developing people in organisations.

To build this argument, I would like first to highlight certain issues within the coaching field that I consider to be the conceptual ‘muddy waters’ of organisational coaching (Bachkirova, 2024). I previously argued that the absence of conceptual clarity in the field of organisational coaching goes along with the lack of serious exploration of coaching’s axiological dimension, which should set out the articulated purpose, values and significance of coaching as a credible service. Exploration of this dimension involves answering questions such as:

- What is the purpose of organisational coaching?
- What problems does this service aim to solve?
- What is the balance between value and harm of such a service to individuals, organisations, societies and the planet?

Only when we have addressed these questions as fully as possible can we decide what qualifies as ‘quality’ in the provision of this service, against which we can assess if specific technological improvements add any value. However, AI developers have already identified coaching as a profitable enterprise and are not concerned about such abstract questions and the long-term consequences of their innovations.

Lack of attention to these questions could be explained by the fact that the coaching industry is evidently solvent and seems to be growing. Moreover, it has survived multiple other popular adjustments, such as the exodus from physical rooms to online, the incorporation of various ‘beautiful ideas’ (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2020) such as excessive use of mindfulness and knowledge from neuroscience, so what further harm could mild ‘digital tweaking’ do? However, it is possible that in this case the damage could be irreversible, and we need to be aware of what is at risk for the profession as a whole.

The difference is that these previous ‘innovations’ did not impinge on the main feature of coaching - its human nature. The main interpersonal characteristics of coaching such as ‘joint inquiry’, appreciation of context, clear ethics, and negotiated contract, remained intact.

Most importantly, though, human intelligence has been at the heart and centre of the entire enterprise and this, I would argue, has allowed the coaching industry to thrive. It is human intelligence that enables the careful manoeuvring between multiple stakeholders; ensures the flexibility and, at the same time, the ethical stance towards complex contextual issues; and helps repair ruptures in relationships. All of these might appear to be at the fringes of coaching but could easily undermine it if not intelligently managed. Of course, there is always a variation in terms of the degrees of intelligence available, even for human coaches, but I will argue that an ‘AI pseudo-coach’ does not have the potential to be a person that matters in a coaching relationship.

In structuring this paper, I will first discuss why human intelligence, however imperfect, has unique features that are fundamentally important for coaching. Second, I enlist support from philosophers of technology to demonstrate that AI does not have the kind of intelligence that matters in coaching. Third, I explore some implications that arise from putting too much faith in AI into the enterprise of coaching and the damage this might have on what organisational coaching as a profession stands for. I finish with advocating an attitude to AI that might be more sensible for the various stakeholders of organisational coaching to adopt, so as not to jeopardise the future of this service.

What is it about human intelligence that is so important in coaching

It is not my intention to provide a definition of intelligence. This is an enterprise that is notoriously fraught with difficulty as there are multiple possible variations that are context-specific for which different aspects matter to different extents. My sole aim is to describe some features/aspects of human intelligence that demonstrate its relevance in the context of organisational coaching and at the same time help in distinguishing it from AI. Key amongst these features are the roles of the body, meaning and dialogue in human intelligence.

The first feature that drastically differentiates human intelligence from artificial is the way we perceive details important for understanding and action. Referring to Merleau-Ponty, Dreyfus (1972) argues that the human way to perceive and act is not through details, concepts, plans, etc. It is our *body* that grasps the gestalt and then acts. Humans respond to the world immediately rather than through the analysis of details. In grasping the complexity of clients’ situations, this is how coaches identify patterns to reflect back to clients and to facilitate further exploration. AI cannot do this. Floridi (2023), referring to this feature of intelligence, points out how CAPTCHA (the tool used by many websites to ensure that you are not a robot that was first developed as far back as 1997) remains an insurmountable task for AI. This gives some indication how little progress has been made in terms of the production of non-biological intelligence (p. 27).

Body allows *an optimal grip on reality* through movement by interacting with objects of perception. Dreyfus called this ability ‘skilful coping’ (1972). In essence, human intelligence is based on our physical embeddedness in the world. Because of this grip on reality, we make predictions and take risks, both being constituents of skilful coping. Because of the ability to create mental simulations, we can have ‘as-if’ experiences and are thus able to understand situations we do not participate in. Our cognition is embodied: it happens not just in the brain. Emotions, for example, as an aspect of the whole body, are central to our thinking and action (e.g., Claxton, 2005, 2015). All of these allow humans to cope with imprecision, ambiguities and metaphors. This is why talking one-to-one is far superior to messaging for understanding the intentions and responses of others as the voice, being part of the body, adds more nuanced information by its prosodic variables, such as intonation, pace,

rhythm, etc. Computers do not have all the above qualities of the body and therefore cannot be intelligent in the way that humans are.

The controversial physicist David Bohm (1996) highlights further nuances of human intelligence that show how far AI is from emulating it. He argues that intelligence is what is not algorithmic and mechanical even in human thinking. It is the immediate perception of that which is false, which can happen through direct insight, that best characterizes human intelligence. This happens because human intelligence is in our embodied ability to grasp *meaning*. As argued by Floridi (2023, p. 24), “it is less about solving some problems and more about deciding which problems are worth solving, why, for what purpose, and acceptable cost, trade-offs, and consequences.”

Intelligence particularly matters for ethical judgements that are constantly required in coaching situations. We arrive at moral evaluations not through solving logical puzzles but through consideration of what is irreducible in us: subjectivity, dignity, desire – all the things that AI doesn't have. This subjectivity is an important player when meaning is co-constructed through relationship with others, and this is why in coaching we deal with meaning tentatively and together as it emerges in relationship with clients.

Intelligence is also needed for understanding the client (Bakhtin, 1973). I have argued elsewhere that one of the most important values for coaching clients is *being understood* in their unique and complex set of circumstances, with consideration for their personality, values and attitudes and the unique set of challenges in work and life that they are facing (Bachkirova, 2024). Recognising such uniqueness does not foster self-inflation of the client or position them against others and the organisation. This understanding has no other agenda than being a prerequisite for productive *thinking together* (Stacey, 2014), essential for real working relationships. AI offers only a surrogate of such *responsive understanding*.

Intelligence allows meaning to be shaped and developed in human interaction through dialogue or joint inquiry. Bakhtin (1973, p. 71) has argued that “human thought becomes genuine thought, i.e., an idea, only under the condition of living contact with another foreign thought, embodied in the voice of another person.” His even stronger argument is that human “life is dialogical by its very nature. To live means to engage in dialogue, to question, to listen, to answer, to agree, etc.” (Bakhtin, 1961/1979, p. 318). This view is echoed by Bohm (1996) who writes that dialogue is a way of life in which one remains open to the Other, to difference, and to the possibility of new understanding, change, and personal growth. I would say that this is what is offered by another human in coaching and ensures the value of this service in the increasing complexity of current conditions of life and work by offering partnership in clients' inquiries. AI, however, cannot be that Other as it is not embodied, does not understand meaning and only imitates dialogue.

It is important, of course, not to overstate the actual power of human intelligence in each particular case and to recognise that the quality of intelligence in human coaches varies. However, humans are equipped with the *necessary* conditions for delivering good quality coaching simply by virtue of being human. To create *sufficient* conditions humans do need, of course, much more than to simply be human. Good quality coaching requires quality coach education, continuing development, ethical maturity, all of these in the context of appropriate governing of the coaching industry in organisations. Artificial coaches, however, do not even meet the necessary conditions (Bachkirova & Kemp, 2024), a point further developed in the next section.

Why technology and AI are of limited help in coaching

Although we might have limited understanding of many technological advances and often have limited control of every tool that is created, we cannot deny the value technology provides in many areas of our life. At the same time, we recognize that technologies are not neutral and therefore their ‘products’ vary in terms of benefits and harms depending on how they are used. We gradually learn to take into account the cost of technological advances in terms of the resources they require and unpredictable consequences that may arise. However, it seems that this learning is currently weakened when presented with such an exciting innovation as AI, which entices with a promise of novelty, new powers and benefits. Many authors address concerns like these about AI in general (Dreyfus, 1972; Floridi, 2023; Beetham, 2024; Dennett, 2023). I will highlight only those that demonstrate limitations of AI in comparison to human intelligence in addition to those I already mentioned in the previous section.

Considering that it is in our nature to attribute human features to anything and everything, AI chatbots are most easily accepted as ‘human-like’ (Blut et al., 2021; Einola et al., 2023). They create a great impression of communicating and being able to think in ways that are easy to be convinced by. But are we being willingly deceived that we are communicating with a thinking ‘partner’? As an important characteristic of the coaching process is the collaborative activity of ‘thinking together’ (Stacey, 2014), it matters if machines can really think. Interestingly, even the greatest authority in ‘machine thinking’, Alan Turing (1950), said there was no way of answering the question of whether the *machine* can *think*, because both terms lack scientific definitions. It would be ‘meaningless to deserve discussion’. Dijkstra (1984) was even more categorical about Turing’s famous criteria to settle the question of whether Machines Can Think. He said that it is ‘a question of which we now know that it is about as relevant as the question of whether Submarines Can Swim’. If the functioning of AI cannot be established as thinking, recognizing it as an intelligence is even harder obviously.

At the same time, even without an agreed definition of intelligence in principle, we can still ask if AI can do what human intelligence can. Floridi (2023, p. 21), for example, is quite clear that the project of reproducing human intelligence has failed: “...as a branch of cognitive science interested in intelligence production, AI remains science fiction and has been a dismal disappointment. ... AI does not merely underperform with respect to human intelligence. It has not yet even joined the competition.” Similar arguments are made by Bender et al (2021), who somewhat scornfully refers to large language models as ‘stochastic parrots’ (Bender et al, 2021), a description which convincingly demonstrates that intelligence and linguistic capabilities do not go together.

This does not, however, mean that AI applications are not successful. They are, but not by replicating human intelligence. In fact, Floridi (2023) argued that they became much more successful when the developers stopped trying to simulate human intelligence. AI is not about reproducing any kind of biological intelligence; it is about doing *without it*. It solves problems in ways different to those employed by humans, bypassing the hard axiological problems of meaning, relevance, understanding, truth, intelligence, insight, etc. (Floridi, 2023). It is really up to us, then, to decide what it is that we need AI for and to make sure that we are not beguiled into accepting AI as a poor substitute for the things that really matter in the human realm. This is existentially relevant, not only to coaching, but to the experience of being a person in general. I cannot agree more with a humorous call for AI ‘to do my laundry

and dishes so I can do art and writing, not for AI to do my art and writing so that I can do my laundry and dishes’.

Floridi (2023) goes so far as to suggest that AI is an oxymoron. It is a new form of *agency*, not of intelligence (2023, p. 6) and should be called AA (Artificial Agency). By suggesting ‘agency’, he is utilizing a minimalist definition, satisfying only three criteria (p. 10):

- Being able to receive and use data from the environment
- Taking action based on input data to achieve goals autonomously
- Improving performance by learning from interactions

Whether this proposition by Floridi (2023, p. 208) is taken on board or not, I agree with his description of the most effective contribution from AI, which is inviting us “to reflect more seriously and less complacently on who we are, could be, and would like to become, and thus our responsibilities and self-understanding.” Coaching is already a place where such things are addressed on a scale of individual projects, but the AI revolution brings these issues home with more urgency for coaching as a profession. By discussing meaning that matters, values that need to be affirmed, and the many assumptions that need to be questioned, we begin to properly fulfil what it is that coaching has the potential to contribute to the human condition. This is not a task that artificial intelligence has the capability to achieve.

What is at risk

As part of exercising human intelligence, it is important to recognise that the development and use of AI are not as benign as developers and AI advocates make them out to be. There are consequences, some of which may be damaging in a number of ways. The first such consequence starts from acknowledging that AI is successful, but not as the result of AI adapting to us and our world. Floridi (2023) argues that it is the other way around - we have been transforming the world into an increasingly AI-friendly environment. Every step that we take in digitizing our environment and expanding the infosphere, we create an ecosystem in which AI systems become exponentially more useful and successful.

His warning is that the risk we are running is that our technologies and especially AI might shape our physical and conceptual environments. We already live in the infosphere (Floridi, 2023), but because of the exponential growth of computational power and speed of technological advancement, a significant part of our life now depends on it. So far coaching has been operating in more than the infosphere, but the pressures, both implicit and explicit, to embrace AI into coaching push the discipline into this techno-environment in a persistently enculturating way. This risks coaching becoming a dry information exchange aimed solely towards mechanistically defined ‘goals’ when values, meaning, desires and full-scale subjectivity (the ‘axiological dimension’) are being marginalized.

Without human encounter, even when it includes clashes of values and relational tensions, technology will continue to degrade human interaction and human intelligence. Humans become part of the extended domain of the machines, e.g. working to improve the functioning of AI machinery, which at the same time leads to authentic human activity disappearing by providing a poor substitute. The ethical concern here pertains to the moral worth of human dignity that was famously captured by Kant’s categorical imperative to not

treat humans as means to ends. In coaching, this imperative is addressed through careful contracting to ensure that the ‘mutual use’ of parties is fairly negotiated. It is a way to mitigate the unusual and complex ethical tension at the heart of organizational coaching (Bachkirova, 2024), where the quality of coaching depends on there being a trusting and confidential relationship between the client and coach, but coaches are paid by another party who has an invested interest in the outcome of this intervention. With exclusion, or at least minimization, of the human coach, the coaching contract is compromised ‘upstream’ to being an expression of what matters only to the organization; a maneuver justified by the constraints of technology.

In this set up, the needs of organizations take considerably greater priority, thereby increasing the inequality already inherent in neo-liberal economies. Technologies are typically presented as means of redistributing the power and freedom of users, but, as market forces dictate, they disproportionately benefit those who already have the resources that put them in the position of being able to take further advantage of these innovations (Schmachtenberger, 2024). This is why I believe that promoting AI ‘coaching’ under the umbrella of ‘democratizing coaching’ is a highly disingenuous claim. Those in the position of power will continue using human coaching, while the rest are provided with a poor-quality substitute.

Another concern of a psychological nature is about what AI is doing not for us but to us, as argued by Sherry Turkle (2015), on the grounds that our engagement with the world as interfaced through computers makes fundamental changes to who we are. In many ways, we gradually remove ourselves from real events and by substituting our interactions with digital means we dehumanize the important elements of our life. For example, people become satisfied with ‘pretend empathy’ and come to believe that this is what empathy is really like. An example of this kind of interpersonal category error is that of AI assisted medical diagnosis which is already considered as providing more empathy than human doctors (NY Times, 2024). Turkle (2015) anticipates that people will start expecting from humans what they get from machines, describing real cases of ‘*artificial intimacy*’ (e.g., children develop ‘friendship’ with an artificial friend and then expect this kind of empathy from real people). I believe this phenomenon is not dissimilar to the consequences of the ‘relationship’ with pornography. In getting used to surrogates which are ‘easy’, real human relationships might become too stressful or unpredictable and the availability of digital surrogates offering the illusion of interpersonal intimacy may promote degrees of narcissistic internalization even more than is already troubling in Western society (Cushman, 1996).

Another important consequence of digitalizing our life is losing trust in information in general because of LLM’s tendency to ‘hallucinate’ (Aladakatti & Senthil Kumar, 2023; Athaluri et al., 2023). Daniel Dennett (2024) is very categorical about this danger:

Because we won't know what we know, and we won't know who to trust, and we won't know whether we're informed or misinformed, we may become either paranoid and hyper-sceptical, or just apathetic and unmoved. Both of those are very dangerous avenues. And they're upon us. (Dennett, 2024)

Dennett (2023) is also quite radical in arguing that the creators of technology that results in such effects should be sued. He believes that this should be taken as seriously as molecular biologists developing the capability for biological warfare or atomic physicists paving the way for nuclear war. He calls it the ‘real code red’.

In addition to the issue of losing trust in information because of this ‘hallucinatory tendency’ as argued by Dennett (2024), I would question the use of this term in the first place. Naming chatbot disinformation as ‘hallucination’ is more than a little misleading because first of all it assumes a human frailty as being naturally available to digitally-organised information processing. Secondly and mainly, it implies that AI hallucinations are forgivable because in humans they are troublesome only to those who hallucinate. This could be seen as a clever strategy to deflect responsibility for the propagation of false information and camouflage the fact that consequences of hallucinations matter to all users of chatbots. Considering all of this, I would argue that according to the criteria set out by Harry Frankfurt (2005) in defining the phenomenon of ‘bullshitting’, AI ‘hallucinations’ should be called as such. Interestingly, Frankfurt argues that bullshitting is far more damaging than lying because a liar at least makes the conscious effort to lie as they know what the truth is and intentionally undertake to subvert it. On the other hand, the bullshitter simply does not care about truth, and this is what AI is.

Unfortunately, a clever misappropriation of AI is already happening. AI coaching is currently promoted as an intervention that is based on a proven method (questioning) thereby minimising biases the human coach might have. This sounds laudably like a commitment to objectivity and precision, but in reality, it is more mundane because it cares mainly about reducing cost and improving the organisation’s return on investment. Coaching, however, is about, and should be seen as being about, a different level of investment: the development of people, a process in which subjectivity and individualised approaches are essential elements. This development, in turn, arguably leads to higher productivity and justifies the investment in the longer-term (Maier, 2021). This discrepancy of intention might explain why some early reviews (Upwork, 2024) show how different the attitudes and responses are to the use of AI coaching between employers and employees: employers, being motivated by short-term cost-effectiveness, responding favourably at 96%, whilst employees seem considerably less impressed with 77% saying that AI reduces their productivity.

This disparity seems usefully supported by coaching clients working in a ‘tech environment’ as reported by their coach: “They want nothing to do with coachbots! Coaching is a refuge from the tech and a space where they can decompress with a human and be in relationship. Where empathy and thinking together is practised. A ‘postmodern confessional’ as Simon Western says” (Duhigg, 2024).

Conclusion

It is clear that the digital revolution is inevitable and already makes a difference in our lives. Digital technology helps in solving many problems in a huge number of contexts and it will continue to do so and do it well. The argument I have been making here, and will continue to make elsewhere, along with other authors (e.g., Floridi, 2023; Beetham, 2024) is that the use of this technology should be part of a *human project* utilised in service of directions in which *we* collectively wish to go, because it is only us (as human persons) who can see our world in terms of meaning and purpose. Just because technological advances demonstrate growing capabilities does not automatically entail that these should uncritically be put into practice without difficult conversations being had concerning possible consequences. In coaching, instead of being seduced by the fashionable allure of ‘shiny new things’, it makes better sense to consider how to respond to questions such as these:

- Is coaching a job that should be kept human?

- Is the aggressive development of AI coaching in organisations worth it considering the price the rest of the world has to pay for it?
- What do we gain and what do we lose if even basic coaching becomes a province of AI?

In answering these questions, it might be useful to remember what Hubert Dreyfus (1972) wrote in relation to some technological advances: “The first man to climb a tree could claim tangible progress toward reaching the Moon – yet, actually reaching the Moon requires qualitatively different methods than tree-climbing.” In offering people coaching services supplied by people, we already have a good method. Rather than invest in spoiling it, perhaps we would do better to invest our efforts in improving it in ways that increase its benefit to a wider clientele.

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