

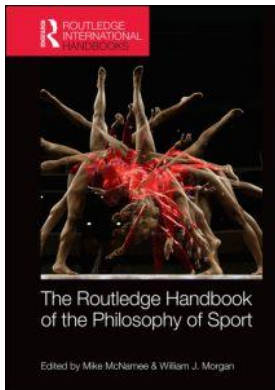
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Mike McNamee, William J. Morgan

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Jeffrey P. Fry

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PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACHES TO COACHING

Jeffrey P. Fry

Introduction

In this chapter, I analyze trends in contemporary philosophical reflection on coaching, and I point to some bold and perhaps, in the estimation of some individuals, unsettling future directions for philosophical thought and research. This is an invitation to consider potentially far-reaching ideas about minds, brains, and decision making in terms of their possible implications for a philosophy of coaching. These ideas challenge the default view, which involves a kind of “dogmatic slumber” reflected in the widespread, implicit acceptance of a pervasive “perennial philosophy.”¹

What is meant to by a “*philosophical* approach to coaching?” The question arises in part owing to the variety of ways, ranging from loosely to more restrictively, in which the word “philosophy” is used. Some people may deem it desirable for a coach to develop a philosophy with respect to coaching. But what is thereby intended in each case warrants clarification.

For analytical purposes, I distinguish between a *coaching philosophy* and a *philosophy of coaching*. By “coaching philosophy,” I refer to an individual’s reflective views on coaching as a strategic enterprise. Sufficient conditions for having a *coaching philosophy* will be met if, for example, an individual has developed views about the employment of game strategies under specified conditions, or of ways to motivate athletes to achieve desired outcomes. Thus, having a coaching philosophy in this sense will be closely related to instrumental or means–end reasoning.

By “philosophy of coaching,” I refer to a further reflective distancing from coaching as a strategic practice; that is, to adopting a position that the coach is not precluded from adopting, and ideally will be conversant with, but which is the special purview of the trained philosopher. In developing a *philosophy of coaching*, philosophical tools and concepts are brought to bear on thinking about the nature and purposes of coaching. Empirical methods of investigation, such as those employed in the natural and social sciences, may also helpfully inform a philosophy of coaching. A philosophy of coaching need not be tied primarily to means–ends reasoning. Indeed, in this chapter I deviate from a purely instrumental approach to coaching.

When developing a philosophy of coaching, significant weight may be given to normative considerations. In particular, such considerations come to the fore in specifying the qualities of a good coach, or in unpacking what it means to possess coaching expertise. In part I of this

chapter, I discuss the vexing issue of the good coach. This topic is challenging in part due to the ambiguity and vagueness that attach to the word “good.” In addition, there is the challenge of determining the threshold for a “good enough” coach.

In Part II, I examine applications of ethical theories in contemporary philosophical accounts of coaching. This focus is fitting, given recent work in this area, and given that the ethical dimension suffuses other aspects of coaching (Simon, 2013: 48). In Part III, I focus on how metaphysics can inform a philosophy of coaching. In particular, I examine fundamental positions in the philosophy of mind and their implications for our understanding of coaching. I suggest that the practical orientations of coaches reflect simulacra of various stances in the philosophy of mind. In Part IV, I thematize further underdeveloped areas of consideration for the philosophy of coaching by considering epistemic competencies and limitations of coaches. I highlight this issue because the coach is entrusted with consequential decision making. Ethical considerations continue to loom in Part IV, under the umbrella of agent-centered concerns relevant to moral psychology.

I. The good coach

Who is the good coach, and when is the good coach *good enough*? These issues call for nuanced treatment. While a high definition picture of the good coach may elude us, it may nevertheless be possible to sharpen the image.

Why the good coach is hard to find

Any attempt to delineate precisely the necessary and sufficient conditions of a good coach faces significant challenges. In his classic book, *The Varieties of Goodness*, Georg Henrik von Wright (1996, p. 33) suggests that when we speak of “a good K” – teacher, chess player, carpenter, scientist, and so forth – we frequently mean to say that an individual is “good at” “some well-defined activity” named by a term. As von Wright (1996, p. 33) puts it: “The good K is a K, who is good at the proper activity of K’s.” So, a good teacher is good at teaching and a good chess player is good at playing chess. In this sense of “good,” a good coach is good at coaching. But under what description do we identify someone as good at coaching? Is the goodness of the good coach a simple, unanalyzable property, only to be apprehended by intuition? Or are there rather recognizable, good-making qualities of a good coach? I adopt the stance that the process of identifying qualities of a good coach is not a hopeless task. Nevertheless, it is a more complex process than some acknowledge.

Consider first the close association in the minds of many of winning with being a good coach. Is being a winning coach a reliable marker of being good *at* coaching? Various considerations undermine confidence in this reliability. One consideration is the fact that coaches may resort to flagrant forms of cheating. It is true that cheating coaches can create the impression that they have won, and they may also gain the spoils of victory. Nevertheless, formalists will protest that cheaters never win insofar as they violate the constitutive rules of a sport. Indeed, formalists may deny that cheaters are even playing the game.

A second reason for being wary of assuming too tight of a connection between the good coach and the winning coach is that coaches can amass easy victories by scheduling weak opponents. Victories over non-competitive opponents do not guarantee that a winning coach is a good coach. On the contrary, predictably lopsided victories show that the athletes and coaches have not faced worthy challenges (Simon, 2013, p. 53). Again, possession of a winning record may not be a sufficient condition for being a good coach.

There are also reasons to doubt that winning is a *necessary* condition for being a good coach. As previously noted, the level of athletic talent on hand is often a major factor, even if it is not always the decisive factor, in determining who wins.² While coaches' contributions to winning may not be negligible factors, coaches have a limited role to play in athletic success. If you are short, slow, and can barely jump off the ground, any coach will face a formidable challenge in helping you to realize your dreams of being a professional basketball player.

Even if a coach assists in developing athletic talent, the outcome will reflect the bounded potentiality of the athletes. Furthermore, although a coach might be credited for recognizing and making efforts to recruit athletes with significant potential, the success of recruitment efforts may hinge on factors beyond a coach's control, such as proximity of the location of a team to an athlete's family, or even the kind of landscape or weather that an athlete prefers.

In the final analysis, if a coach is in charge of a team with negligible athletic ability, and yet the coach faces a schedule of opponents that are considerably more talented than the members of her own team, the coach may be exemplary under the circumstances, even if her team does not post a winning record. If these considerations are salient, then possession of a winning record may not be a necessary condition for being *good at* coaching.

Winning appears to be neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for being a good coach. But this does not mean that, other things being equal, winning is irrelevant to good coaching. If athletic contests are viewed as tests of competitive excellence, winning is (*ceteris paribus*) evidence of athletic excellence. Likewise, especially in cases where athletic opponents are evenly matched in talent, coaches' contributions may tip the balance one way or the other, and thus in such cases winning may be evidence of good coaching.

Winning may be more loosely connected to being good at coaching than some might hold. A more fine-grained analysis of the good coach may reveal other factors relevant to good coaching. The individual who is *good at* coaching exhibits a version of what von Wright (1996, p. 32) refers to as "technical goodness." If the coach is technically proficient, the coach is skillful, even if this skill does not always translate into wins. Technical proficiency is exhibited in analyzing game situations and proposing effective strategies to meet challenges. Of course, the technically proficient coach will also need to be an effective communicator if these technical skills are to be efficacious. Other things being equal, this coach's athletes should enjoy a fair share of athletic success, but they will not necessarily win when the talent level of opponents is disproportionately higher. No doubt, this notion of technical goodness also captures an aspect of what it means to be good at coaching. But other nuances are also available, some of which require us to negotiate morally fraught terrain.

Georg von Wright (1996, p. 19) also identifies what he refers to as "instrumental goodness," which "is mainly attributed to implements, instruments, and tools, such as knives, watches, and cars." He (p. 20) glosses this usage by saying that "To attribute instrumental goodness to some thing is *primarily* to say of this thing that *it serves some purpose well*." In a derivative sense, perhaps persons and their actions may be said to possess instrumental goodness. If so, then when coaches are evaluated in terms of whether they serve some purpose well, then the evaluation is in terms of instrumental goodness. Given a plurality of purposes, the coach may demonstrate instrumental goodness in various ways. A coach may be linked to such ends as producing victories, cultivating accomplished players and the rewards they gain, and generating familial and community pride.

By highlighting the instrumental goodness of coaches, however, we risk assimilating them to objects whose reason for existence as coaches is to serve our purposes. If these purposes are not fulfilled in any given case, this may lead to the unwarranted conclusion that the coach is a poor coach *simpliciter* (von Wright, 1996). In turn, a negative assessment of a coach in terms of

instrumental goodness can be a source of stress that can plague a coach's sense of wellbeing, and can even lead coaches to deviate from ethical coaching practices in order to maintain a favored status and job security. In the context of considering the instrumental worth of coaches it is thus salient to invoke the Kantian prohibition of treating humanity simply as a means to an end.

Closely related to instrumental goodness is what von Wright (1996, p. 41) terms "utilitarian goodness" or "usefulness." He (1996, pp. 43–44) acknowledges that the terms "instrumental goodness" and "utilitarian goodness" ("usefulness") are sometimes used interchangeably by philosophers. Nevertheless, he distinguishes between the two notions by pointing to the difference between the phrases "be good for a purpose" (related to usefulness) and "serve a purpose well" (having instrumental goodness), where in the latter case the thing in question is used in a way essentially connected with it. It is, however, difficult to distinguish essential from accidental purposes that a coach may serve. Again, as an illustrative example, consider the fact that some individuals may hold that being an effective recruiter is partly constitutive of what it means to be a good collegiate coach. But talent for recruiting may not be equally relevant at all levels of coaching. In addition, as I noted earlier, success in recruiting gifted athletes depends in part on factors beyond a coach's control. Finally, note that whatever has utilitarian goodness, like that which is instrumentally good, is conducive to being regarded as a means to an end, and therein lies a potential moral hazard.³

The morally good coach

As I have indicated, it is important to attend to the ethical treatment of coaches. This is arguably an underdeveloped theme in the philosophy of coaching. In addition to its intrinsic significance, ethical treatment of the coach, by example, sets a bar of expectation for the coach's own deportment. I now turn to the issue of the moral status of the coach, since a robust account of a good coach will also attend to the moral qualities of a good coach.⁴

While being a morally good coach may not suffice to make one a good coach overall, a thick description of a good coach will give prominence to this dimension. Being a good coach may not require sainthood, but the absence of a clear moral baseline as a qualification for a good coach is itself problematic. Of course, the term "morally good" is itself ambiguous. Is the morally good coach a person of principle? If so, which principles are worthy of a coach's commitment? Or is the morally good coach rather a person of virtue? If so, what virtues does the good coach exemplify? Is the good coach rather both principled and virtuous? How does being a morally good coach relate to being a good person or to being a morally good person overall? Such issues warrant more space than I can allocate to them in this chapter. But we should not merely assume agreement on answers to these questions.

*Epistemic virtues of the good coach*⁵

Mike McNamee (2011) argues that it is not sufficient to equip coaches with a professional code of conduct consisting of moral rules to follow. Rather, it is also imperative that coaches possess virtues. Among them, McNamee (2011) highlights trustworthiness as a core virtue. At the same time, Sigmund Loland (2011) argues that coaches need to be enlightened generalists, who possess various kinds of expertise, including knowledge of the sciences and moral wisdom. These two ideas are blended with the notion of a robustly good coach in the following syllogism. A robustly good coach is a trustworthy coach. A trustworthy coach is an enlightened generalist. Therefore, a robustly good coach is an enlightened generalist.

This line of reasoning suggests that the robustly good coach will possess and use epistemic competencies. This coach possesses not only skills (both in moral and non-moral terms) but also background knowledge that informs and enables those skills. The robustly good coach's repertoire of competencies include, but are not limited to, knowledge of the fundamentals and rules of the relevant sport, self-knowledge (a moral dimension of a coach's character), insight into the particular individuals with whom the coach interacts, and awareness of what human beings, and in some cases, nonhuman animals, are in general like. The robustly good coach also possesses know-how, which includes an ability to transmit knowledge to athletes.

The coach who is an enlightened generalist will also acknowledge his or her epistemic limitations. To quote former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, there are "known unknowns" and "unknown unknowns." Later in this chapter, I look at the role that inchoate factors play in coaches' judgments and decision making. For now, I issue a promissory note by asserting the relevance of epistemic virtue for a philosophy of coaching.

Summary

In sum, the nature of a good coach is complicated, and it is becoming more so. As our knowledge base evolves, so do the standards of proficiency in the vocations, including that of coaching. I have not exhausted the senses of "good" that may attach to the good coach. What has emerged is that a sufficiently robust conception of a good coach will be many sided. It will refer to a number of competencies – moral and non-moral competencies – which may, to be sure, be intertwined – but will also point out limitations of the coach, inherent and otherwise.

A good coach may or may not be hard to find, depending on what one means by a "good coach." These understandings must be articulated and debated. Much hangs in the balance, including the good name of the coaching profession.

II. Ethical theory in contemporary philosophy of coaching

Philosophical thought on coaching today evinces a variety of approaches, ranging from theoretical accounts to thick analyses of specific issues. One factor that figures prominently in various approaches is the role of the coach as moral decision maker. In what follows, I sample ethical frameworks as they are utilized in contemporary philosophical reflection on coaching.

Theoretical stances

Corresponding to a smorgasbord of options standardly discussed in surveys of ethical theories, contemporary philosophical thinking about coaching also evinces a range of normative stances. Perhaps it should come as no surprise that recent significant philosophical work on coaching has highlighted ethical concerns. Consider the fact that, in the introduction to their book *The Ethics of Sports Coaching*, editors Alun R. Hardman and Carwyn Jones (2011, p. 2) state: "Most, if not all, coaching exchanges have a moral dimension to them. This premise is predicated on the fundamental Kantian principle that all persons are first and foremost ends in themselves."

Robert Simon (2013) notes that there is intermingling of the moral dimension of coaching with other facets of coaching. He (p. 48) states: "Clearly coaching is a complex activity that involves a network of strategic, technical, personal and moral dimensions, all of which may be interconnected in particular cases." To illustrate this interconnectedness, consider the case of the benchwarmer, as discussed by Scott Kretchmar (2013). Benchwarmers typically work hard in practice and prepare their teammates for the challenges presented by game opponents. Should

benchwarmers also participate during significant outcome-affecting periods of athletic contests?

Obviously, coaches' decisions about allocations of playing time are *strategic* decisions that influence the outcomes of games. These decisions also involve a *personal* dimension, insofar as athletes typically want to participate in meaningful ways. In addition, Kretchmar (2013) argues that there is a *moral* dimension to coaching decisions with respect to playing time. Kretchmar's approach to benchwarmers draws on a deontological framework that is also attentive to contextual matters, especially the age-level of the participants.⁶ At lower levels of competition, Kretchmar (2013, p. 125) stresses "the rights to basic benefits," including "a right to learn and improve." As he also (2013, p. 122) writes: "The deontological side of my thinking privileges the rights of players over arguments of utility."

In a paper that I authored entitled "Coaching a Kingdom of Ends" (Fry, 2000), I also used a deontological, and explicitly Kantian framework, while addressing a number of scenarios faced by coaches. The Kantian approach employs a decision procedure that emphasizes universalizable maxims and treating persons as ends in themselves, never as mere means to ends (Kant, 1964). These considerations place normative constraints on coaches' decision making.

Even those who are favorably disposed to Kantian arguments may not view the Kantian framework as capturing all that is morally salient. Thus, Simon (2013, p. 48) contends that Kantian considerations provide a "moral baseline," but that coaching involves "complexities" that require good judgment.

Ethical approaches that complement or compete with a Kantian-style approach to ethics are readily found in the philosophy of coaching literature. For example, the search for a viable philosophy of coaching may lead to virtue-theoretic approaches that focus on character traits, context sensitivity, and practical wisdom. An illustrative example can be found in Mike McNamee's (2011) article entitled "Celebrating Trust: Virtues and Rules in Ethical Conduct." McNamee considers the limitations of rule-based ethical codes of conduct for coaches, and cites the need for virtues in coaching, especially the virtue of trustworthiness. This need is central, but by no means exclusively present, in youth coaching. He writes:

Now the coach is someone in whom discretion is invested. Parents value their children more than just about anything in the world. When they entrust the coach with their children, they place within his or her sphere of influence a vulnerable person, one who can be damaged in a variety of ways. Yet they necessarily trust the coach as a professional.

(McNamee, 2011, p. 35)

McNamee's discussion of trust points us towards the critical issue of scope. Over what domains must a good coach exhibit trustworthiness? Once again, Loland's normative portrayal of the coach as an enlightened generalist is relevant. But just how broadly should we conceive of the expertise of a good coach?

For those who, like virtue ethicists, emphasize practical wisdom and good judgment with respect to coaching Simon writes:

Proponents of the view just articulated rightly point out that the coach must be a master of 'spontaneous response.' Making just the right substitutes, for example, just at the right time, or changing the defense just at the moment when the opponent is least likely to adjust to the change, call for good judgments in response to complex situations, not automatic application of strategic rules. Similarly, when the ethical

dimension of decision making is paramount, good judgment rather than the mastery of rules is key.

(Simon, 2013, p. 49)

He (2013, p. 50) points out that those who emphasize good judgment and practical wisdom should be prepared to give reasons for their judgments. He (2013, p. 51) further suggests that the use of a method of “reflective equilibrium” that moves back and forth between judgments in specific cases and a theoretical stance is appropriate.

In keeping with this stance, Simon (2010, 2013) has labeled his own approach as “broad internalism” or “interpretivism.” He contends that a sporting contest is ideally a “mutual quest for excellence.” This insight into the point of sport provides normative guidance. Against this background, Simon suggests that sports participants are not limited to constitutive and regulative rules of sport for practical guidance. Instead, a coach may also appeal to broad principles that are grounded in the basic idea of an athletic contest.

John Russell (2004, p. 94–5) provides an example that displays reasoning consistent with Simon’s interpretivist approach. The example supports the idea of adjudicating sports in ways that allow relevant skills to be tested. In July of 1983, George Brett of the Kansas City Royals of Major League Baseball hit what might have ended up being a game-winning home run. The home run was nullified by the umpires after opposing team manager Billy Martin of the New York Yankees protested that Brett had smeared pine tar resin on an area of the bat proscribed by the rules. The Yankees won. Subsequently, American League President Lee McPhail, not wanting the game to be decided on a technical issue, reinstated the home run, and ordered the game to be replayed from that point. As a result, Kansas City proved victorious.

While appreciative of features of the interpretivist framework, William Morgan (2013, p. 75) argues that if it is not contextualized, the approach is ahistorical and thus deficient. Therefore, interpretivism must be “tweaked” in “a conventionalist way”. He writes:

But what I want to argue is that what is most needed when our normative predicaments require fine-grained normative judgments and responses from us is not so much the personal counsel of wise individuals but the collective counsel of the battle-tested social conventions of sport that shape, or so I will argue, so much of our understanding and appreciation of the purpose and value of competitive sports, to include the so-called practical judgments of coaches and players.

(Morgan, 2013, p. 63)

According to Morgan, this takes place against the backdrop of social conventions from which there is no escape to a “view from nowhere.” Again, he writes that:

the principles that serve as the presuppositions of our normative inquiry into sports, as the basic premises of the arguments we formulate to justify our normative judgments to one another, are social conventions that do their justificatory work in a context-dependent manner as opposed to abstract principles that supposedly do their work in a context-independent manner.

(Morgan, 2013, p. 71)

By virtue of a thickly textured conventionalism, Morgan (2013, p. 62–3) attempts to avoid the potentially ahistorical nature of some brands of interpretivism, and the abstraction of the Kantian-style account. He (p. 62) claims that his conventionalist brand of interpretivism, “while

culturally and historically biased retains critical force nonetheless.” One critical issue is whether Morgan’s brand of conventionalism, given its relativistic nature, can sustain a “critical force” that is sufficiently robust.

Summary

Various ethical frameworks are in evidence in contemporary philosophical thinking about coaching. I have explored here only a representative few of these approaches. One might choose to adopt an eclectic approach that utilizes insights from a variety of frameworks. However, even as ethical theories are applied in the philosophy of coaching, the metaphysical underpinnings of these views are often left implicit and unthematized. This represents a lacuna in the philosophy of coaching. In what follows I make a modest contribution to filling this gap.

III. Why coaches need metaphysics

In this section on the philosophy of mind, I enter relatively unexplored territory for the philosophy of coaching. Some may hold that the considerations that I raise here are too ethereal for a philosophy of coaching. On the contrary, I argue that the default, dualistic view is of consequence, including ethical consequence, as are alternative positions. Furthermore, I contend that a general awareness of these issues will be included in the epistemic competencies of a coach who is an enlightened generalist.

The mind–body–coaching problem

Building on the work of Wilfred Sellars, Owen Flanagan (2002) distinguishes between two approaches to the mind: the “scientific image” and the widely disseminated “humanistic image,” which Flanagan and Sellars link to “perennial philosophy.” According to Flanagan (2002, p. ix.), components of the humanistic image include concepts of a “nonphysical mind, free will, and a permanent, abiding, and immutable soul.” On this dualistic view, human agency works, as Gilbert Ryle (1949) put it, like a “ghost in the machine.”

One does not often encounter explicit challenges to the humanistic image in the philosophy of sport literature, and I suspect even less so among coaches. Perhaps, at least in the West, the humanistic image is dominant among coaches, or even the default view. Therefore, it may be useful to consider coaching in the light of different philosophies of mind. A close examination of coaching may also reveal, in terms of practical orientations, simulacra of various philosophies of mind. I consider these practical orientations, and examine how explicit theoretical commitments to different philosophies of mind might have divergent implications for the theory and practice of coaching. What follows is by not an exhaustive treatment of possible approaches, but rather a sampling of views and potential implications.⁷

The “ghost in the machine”

The Cartesian view of the mind–body relationship is, of course, a dualistic one. The mind and the body are distinct substances. The essential attribute of minds is thought, while bodies are characterized by extension. Descartes claimed, infamously, that the mind and body interact via the pineal gland. Thus, there is a role for mental causation in connection with bodily behaviors. The mind is indestructible, indivisible, non-spatial, and free. Bodies share none of these features.⁸

In the practical orientation of coaches, we can detect elements that are consonant with features of the Cartesian framework. First of all, it seems that the reality of mental causation is widely accepted in sports. Consider the Zen-like aphorism attributed to former Major League baseball catcher and manager Yogi Berra: “Baseball is 90 percent mental, the other half is physical” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013). Or think about how often coaches rhapsodize about the importance of mental toughness, mental fatigue, and having a mental edge. These declarations suggest that a key to athletic performance is exercising mind over matter.

But many philosophers hold that all or at least much of this picture is an illusion. Furthermore, these contrary views are not necessarily tied to reductionist, materialist theories of mind. Adherents to a view called occasionalism claimed that God intervenes on each occasion to correlate occurrences of mental and physical events, without their causal interaction. Those who espoused a view called parallelism contended that God established from the beginning that the occurrence of certain mental events would correlate with and run parallel to the occurrence of physical events, again without the existence of a causal relationship between the correlated phenomena. If either of these views is true, then perhaps former collegiate and US Olympic men’s basketball coach Bob Knight was incorrect when he suggested that God, given weightier matters to attend to, does not care about who wins in sports.

Another feature of the practical orientation of coaching, which is perhaps consonant with Cartesianism and other dualistic approaches, has a darker side. This is the sluggish pace at which coaches and sport administrators have acknowledged and responded to the issue of brain injuries in sport. No doubt, coaches have sent concussed athletes back onto playing fields after they have had their “bell rung” with the ironic admonition to “shake it off.” After all, if the real you is immaterial and indestructible, what happens to your body may be of less consequence, and surmountable. That being said, in the United States, the issue of dementia among former National Football League players is finally capturing attention and may lead to changes in the game and to a ripple effect that will have a significant impact at various levels on the long-term health of athletes.

Finally, note one further implication of the Cartesian view. Each of us is essentially an invisible mind. This view conflicts with other frameworks that view us as essentially embodied beings. One such view is behaviorism.

Behaviorism and the “conditioning coach”

Behaviorism has two standard expressions (Searle, 2004, pp. 35–6). Classic methodological behaviorists focused on the study of behavior for methodological reasons. Mental phenomena were not considered proper objects of scientific study, given that they were purportedly unobservable, subjective, and ghostly. But behavior could be observed, tracked, replicated, and even manipulated to desired ends. Therefore, the mind was bracketed in favor of the more scientifically respectable investigation of behavior.

But logical behaviorists went further than this. They did not merely bracket the mind based on methodological grounds. In logical behaviorism the mind underwent an ontological reduction to behavior and dispositions to behave. On this view, when we refer to “mental” phenomena we mean behavior and behavioral dispositions.

In practice, there is much in coaching that has a behavioristic flavor. First of all, the idea of conditioning plays a prominent role in sport. One thinks first perhaps of the conditioning for physical fitness relevant to a given sport. But the practice of conditioning extends well beyond this in sports. The countless hours devoted to practicing a sport are exercises in conditioning to produce learned, desired behaviors. In the process, coaches mete out rewards to reinforce

desired behaviors and sometimes take punitive measures in attempting to eliminate undesired behaviors.

Authoritarian coaches may even attempt to reserve the prerogative of thinking for themselves and have athletes follow scripts. Some coaches implore athletes simply to “react” to the situation they see in front of them. This approaches something like methodological behaviorism as a practical orientation. Shun the touchy-feely, spectral mental realm and focus on behavior and results.

Logical behaviorism has been widely disparaged (Searle, 2004, pp. 37–9). I do not rehearse these criticisms here, but consider what it would be like to adopt this theoretical orientation as a coach. The logical behaviorist coach need not be troubled with “what it’s like” (to use Nagel’s formulation) to be like Michael Jordan or any other athlete. Add-ons like qualitative states of subjectivity, including affective states, and mental causation will be close relatives of Cartesian “category mistakes,” to use Gilbert Ryle’s (1949) terminology. There is no ghost in the machine. Indeed, one may be tempted to say that there are only machines. In thoroughgoing behaviorism, we will be philosophical zombies, carrying on just as we do, but without qualitative states of consciousness – something like athletes in the zone, that is, the “twilight zone.”

Let’s get physical (metaphysical), or identity theory

Identity theory also takes an ontologically reductionist approach to mental phenomena. As with behaviorism, identity theory comes in two standard forms (Searle, 2004, pp. 41–3). “Type” identity physicalists reduce mental states to types of brains states, or states of the nervous system. The standard example, known now to be far too simplistic in its formulation, is that states of pain are identical to states of C-fiber firings. On the other hand, “token” identity theorists do not reduce mental states to types of brain states. Rather, they hold that each token mental state is identical to some token brain state or other.

Identity theory too has been subjected to numerous criticisms (Searle, 2004, 39–43). One criticism, to be elaborated on further below, is the charge of “neural chauvinism.” Why need mental states be realized in, or identical to, brain states? A second criticism is that, as with behaviorism, the identity theorist is challenged to give an adequate account of *seemingly* qualitative, subjective features of consciousness. This is because, for the identity theorist, a full description of the physical facts leaves room for no remainder to be explained.

I have conjectured that coaches, if polled, would report dualistic views about the mind–body relationship. But what would a coach committed to identity theory and living out its implications be like? A pure reductionist would not worry about Cartesian minds, or irreducibly mental states. The coach would be concerned about bodies moving in desired ways across physical planes. He or she might also be more concerned than some kinds of dualists about brains, brain health, and the frailty of human existence.

Functionalism

Functionalists hold that mental states are “multiply realizable” (cf. Searle, 2004, pp. 43–4, 49–50, 58). This is the antithesis of neural chauvinism. According to functionalists, mental states are potentially realizable in a variety of mediums. For something to count as a mental state, (such as being in a state of belief or desire), it need only stand in the proper causal relationship to inputs and outputs. To take a standard example, perhaps then the thermostat has mental states. The functionalist need not ontologically reduce the mental realm to the physical realm (Searle, 2004, p. 58).

There is a detectable kind of, broadly speaking, practical functionalism that is exhibited in sport and coaching. An illustrative example is found in the practice of college coaches in the United States of revoking athletic scholarships. Athletes can be replaced by functional equivalents or even improvements. After all, the fillers of positions on teams are placeholders, who are multiply realizable. Today, these positions and the players who fill them are sometimes reduced to numbers. Thus, in basketball you are no longer a guard, forward, center, or just a plain basketball player. Instead, you are a “1” or a “4” or a “5,” who performs a functional role. This phenomenon attains its highest level, or perhaps its nadir, in professional sports, where multiple realizability goes without saying. After all, it is not *personal*; it is just business.

What implications follow for a coach who is committed to functionalism as a theoretical perspective? As already suggested, functionalism has a kind of practical orientation – inputs, outputs, and internal states standing in causal relationships. To achieve felicitous results a coach will need to trigger causal states that lead to outputs of desired bodily movements.

“Strong AI”

The consideration of functionalism leads naturally to a discussion of computer functionalism and “strong artificial intelligence,” (AI) a designation coined by John Searle (2004, p. 45). According to Searle’s rendering of computer functionalism, the mind is to the brain (its wetware) as the program is to the hardware of the computer. Linked to this computational theory of mind is the Turing test. Alan Turing contended that if the answers given to questions addressed to a computer are indiscernible from the answers given in human responses, then the computer is intelligent. Searle’s famous and much debated “Chinese room argument” is a foil to these views.⁹ The upshot is that Searle contends that the digital computer of today does not understand anything. It deals in syntax or form, not semantics or meaning.

In the practical orientations of coaches, there are approximate parallels to our relationships to computers. In the case of the computer, the key is to program the machine to execute the desired computations. The results follow from adherence to algorithms. Likewise, there are coaches who function like programmers. Instill the program in the athletes and let it run. They monitor the situation for viruses, including independent thinking and memes that might invade and disrupt the system. It is even the case that in American collegiate sport references to basketball and football *teams* have been replaced by references to the *programs*. Successful programs follow almost algorithmic formulae.

But what would it mean to coach in a manner consistent with a theoretical commitment to a computational theory of mind? One surprising result might be that not much would change. The programming is going on now. Even if coaches do not resort to invasive procedures such as brain surgery to instill their programs, their reach extends into athletes’ plastic and hence malleable brains. Note an additional point as well. On Searle’s reading of the implications of the computational theory of mind, neither coaches nor athletes need be concerned about self-understanding, or mutual understanding. In fact, to the degree that their minds function computationally, there is no understanding at all.

Finally, if “strong AI” is true, in the future “multiple realizability” may take on new meanings in sport. With developing technology, perhaps sports teams of the future will be constituted by intelligent robots. These athlete-bots may be highly coachable, given that they will be more easily programmed and thus more dependable than humans. Athlete-bots may take their place alongside sex-bots for the amorous, and companion-bots for the elderly. Perhaps the technological revolution that MIT professor Sherry Turkle (2011) argues is leading

us to be “alone together” will reach its logical conclusion. We will simply be alone, or alone together with our bots. But perhaps coaches are already unwittingly preparing for this time by spending countless lonely hours cut off from other humans, pouring over videos of their own team’s games and scouting opponents’ tendencies.

Panpsychism

I must confess to finding elegance in panpsychism. The view is teeming with the mental as a fundamental feature of reality. The view has its contemporary proponents. Among them is Galen Strawson (2008). David Chalmers also flirts with it.¹⁰ If you find the view that consciousness is at some level pervasive throughout the world spooky, there is no need to worry. Practical correlates of the view already find instantiations among coaches. I speak here of coaches who love the games they coach, and revere the players, equipment, playing fields, stadia, and perhaps at times even the game officials and referees. Borrowing a term from the theologian Karl Rahner (2010), we might refer to these coaches as “anonymous” panpsychists. These Buberian coaches have a personal, “I-thou” relationship with all aspects of sport.¹¹ They live and breathe sport. They are in a reciprocal relationship of give and take.

A coach with a theoretical commitment to panpsychism would have us entertain a revision of the standard view of physical phenomena, including in sport. In doing so, the pansychist coach might expand common conceptions of the significance of the material world.

Summary

I believe that the philosophy of coaching needs metaphysics, and in particular, the philosophy of mind. A broad awareness of the complexity of the issues should also form part of the knowledge base of the coach who is an enlightened generalist.

I have conjectured that most coaches would, if pressed, express a dualistic view of the mind–body relationship. At the same time, I have argued that simulacra of various philosophies of mind are also present in the practical orientations of coaching. Regardless of which philosophy of mind turns out to be the correct one, it will affect coaches directly. Coaches may turn out to be ghosts in machines. Coaches’ mental states will be reducible or not to behaviors, brain states, or functional relationships, and the mental states of coaches, if they exist in an irreducibly mental form, will either be causally efficacious or, alternatively, as Searle (2004, p. 21) puts it, like the “froth on the wave”.

Differing philosophies of mind do suggest divergent practical orientations towards coaching. So, let’s get metaphysical about coaching.

IV. Coaching in a “cloud of unknowing”

I have examined numerous fundamental conceptions of the mind. But how do coaches utilize the mind to render judgments and make decisions? These questions point to further underdeveloped themes in the philosophy of coaching.

The notion that human beings are rational agents who, in varying degrees, judge and decide in terms of a rational analysis of costs and benefits has been challenged from a number of quarters. These challenges focus on ways that our judgments and decisions are shaped by factors outside of conscious awareness, such as brain states that prompt behavior without the mediation of conscious processes, situational influences on behavior, and heuristics and biases that can lead to systematic distortions of thinking. Serious engagement with these challenges could lead

to a transformation of thinking about the nature of coaching, and especially of our understandings of the authority of the coach.

Coaching with the “new unconscious”

Is it desirable for a coach to know what he is doing and why he is doing it? If so, to what extent are these epistemic conditions realizable? Freudian notions permeate everyday conversation. It is commonplace to suggest that unconscious factors influence our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. That being said, the Freudian unconscious, with its emphasis on repressed sexual desires, has been supplanted in the work of some psychologists by the “new unconscious,” or what is referred to as the “adaptive unconscious.” The extent of the role played by the unconscious is debated, but its handiwork is apparent, and fraught with potential implications for coaching. Consider various kinds of biases that coaches may exhibit. For example, coaches who coach their own children in the context of team sports may unconsciously extend favoritism to them. On the other hand, these coaches may unconsciously overcompensate in an attempt to be fair. Unconscious assumptions and motives may also lead coaches to make coaching decisions that exhibit racial or gender bias. In this regard, consider the practice of “stacking” players in positions accord to conscious or unconscious racial profiles. Finally, consider how biases may influence coaches’ perceptions of athletic officiating or of their own competence.¹²

Psychologist Timothy Wilson (2002, p. 6) suggests that consciousness is not aptly conceived as the “tip of the mental iceberg,” but rather as “the size of a snowball on top of that iceberg.” He goes on to state:

The mind operates most efficiently by relegating a good deal of high-level sophisticated thinking to the unconscious, just as the modern jumbo jetliner is able to fly on automatic pilot with little or no input from the human, ‘conscious’ pilot.

(Wilson, 2002, p. 6)

He goes on to consider what it would be like to forego the operations that take place in the unconscious and to make our way through the world merely on the muscle of consciousness. According to Wilson, the results would be, to put it mildly, debilitating.

Psychologist John Bargh claims that the degree to which automatic processes hold sway rivals the degree of purity advertised for a bar of Dove® soap: 99.44 percent (cited in Kihlstrom, 2008, p. 161). Bargh writes that “most of a person’s everyday life is determined not by their conscious intentions and deliberate choices but by mental processes that are put into motion by features of the environment that operate outside of conscious awareness and guidance” (Bargh and Chartrand, 1999, p. 462; also cited in Kihlstrom, 2008, p. 161).

Psychologist John Kihlstrom (2008) calls the emphasis on unconscious, automatic processes the “automaticity juggernaut.” He argues that stronger claims made in behalf of automaticity may be true, but they have not yet been substantiated by evidence. Nonetheless, to the extent that factors outside of conscious awareness influence thoughts, feelings, and behavior, this is a relevant issue for the philosophy of coaching. This issue adds a further layer of complexity that affects not only a coach’s ability to attain self-knowledge but also other parties’ ability to know the “core” of the coach. In addition, this presents a challenge to the coach’s ability to “read” athletes.

These issues raise questions about the processes by which coaches render judgments and decisions, especially when they must react quickly under pressure. They also pose questions for those whose philosophy of coaching emphasized practical wisdom, good judgment, and virtuous dispositions.

The situated coach

One does not live in a vacuum. We are always situated in contexts, which may function in an inchoate way until we direct our attention to them. Social psychologists, in particular, have emphasized how situations affect our behaviors without our awareness of their influence. In turn, some “situationists” have argued that character traits are neither as global nor as robust as some have heretofore held. Some psychological experiments that are used to buttress situationist claims have reached near-legendary status, such as the famous Milgram (2010) experiment.

We can debate the extent to which situations can influence behaviors while operating outside of our conscious awareness. But to the extent that they do, this has relevance for a philosophy of coaching. It does so because it implies that coaches must contend with a form of situationally induced epistemic opaqueness, since they are always situated in numerous ways, and they cannot be conscious of all of these factors at once.

We are familiar with numerous stories about coaches’ gaffs, lapses, and ethical violations. To what should we attribute them? If the social psychologists are correct, we should beware of the fundamental attribution error, whereby we chalk up behavior to character traits. Instead, the psychologists tell us, we must consider the role of situations. In this regard, John Doris (2010, 205) warns of entering the “moral ‘hot zone’” in which situational factors can overwhelm us. In a complementary vein, philosopher Gilbert Harman (2009) argues that we should be less concerned about educating for character, and more concerned about situating individuals for success.

Coaches often find themselves in the “moral ‘hot zone.’” Their responsibility is great, and their decisions are often made under pressure. While the rewards for winning can be significant, the repercussions of losing pose an existential threat. Indeed, outside pressures can make it seem as if winning and losing are the only relevant factors. This raises a fundamental question: How do we situate coaches for success more broadly defined?

Fast and slow thinking in coaching

Coaching shares features with other occupations. Coaches form judgments and render decisions under conditions of uncertainty, and often under the pressure of time. How should they proceed in order to produce sound judgments?

Research has been conducted on how people make decisions under relevantly similar conditions. Researchers vary on what they emphasize in the final analysis. This can be seen by juxtaposing the work of Gary Klein (1999) and Gerd Gigerenzer (2008), on the one hand, with the findings of Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman (2011) and Amos Tversky on the other.

Klein (1999) has lauded “naturalistic decision making” employed in intuition. His findings come from studying in the field professional firefighters, nurses on neonatal units, chess masters, and others. Klein demystifies intuition and traces expertise to experience and pattern recognition. Gigerenzer’s (2008) research focuses on the way we use “fast and frugal” heuristics in decision making. Under certain conditions, the results can be quite impressive.

On the other hand, Daniel Kahneman (2011) has emphasized the drawbacks of intuitive thinking and the use of the heuristics and biases method.¹³ He claims that intuitive thinking can be derailed by various forms of systematic distortions. Algorithmic processes surpass intuitive thinking. Klein and Kahneman agree that claims that intuitive expertise works best where validity is high and under conditions of certainty.

Coaches embody a variety of decision making styles. At one end of the spectrum are coaches who emphasize sticking to carefully laid plans. At the other end of the theoretical spectrum are particularists, for whom each situation is unique, and who trust their intuitions.

Some coaches rely on quasi-heuristics. Consider the baseball manager who as a rule plays a right-handed pitcher against a heavily left-handed-hitting batting line-up, or the basketball coach who always orders a foul to prevent a potentially game-winning three-point basket in the waning seconds of a game, or who dictates that the basketball be placed in the hands of the player with the “hot hand.” Or consider the football coach who always punts on fourth down. Some coaches cannot resist the idea that a favorite strategy will work, even in the face of contrary statistical evidence. It is like the optical illusion that we cannot help seeing, even when we know that it is an illusion.

On other occasions, an algorithmic-like approach is used. An example of this was Major League Baseball’s Oakland Athletics, as chronicled in Michael Lewis’s (2004) *Money Ball*. The Athletics used finely tuned statistical analyses to guide their baseball decisions.

What do these considerations suggest? First, coaches may be affected by biases that affect judgments and decisions. Second, for younger coaches, this suggests the importance of an apprenticeship, and working with experienced coaches.¹⁴ Third, it is important for coaches at all levels to have colleagues whose alternative perspectives are respected and can represent an intrusion of reality.

The “hidden brain” in the game

Forming a backdrop for all of the considerations in Part IV has been the “hidden brain.”¹⁵ In his book *Incognito: The secret lives of the brain*, neuroscientist David Eagleman writes:

The conscious you – the I that flickers to life when you wake up in the morning – is the smallest bit of what’s transpiring in your brain. Although we are dependent on the functioning of the brain for our inner lives, it runs its own show. Most of its operations are above the security clearance of the conscious mind. The I simply has no right of entry.

(Eagleman, 2011, p. 4)

He continues: “Whether we’re talking about dilated eyes, jealousy, attraction, the love of fatty foods, or the great idea you had last week, consciousness is the smallest player in the operations of the brain” (Eagleman, 2011, p. 5).

Few seriously doubt the tight connection between the brain, on the one hand, and the mind and behavior on the other. The question is, how tight? Even if the precise mapping of neural correlates onto mental states eludes us, the idea that the nervous system is implicated is central.

I mentioned in Section I the vulnerability of the brain to injury. But another kind of vulnerability needs to be emphasized, having to do with the brain’s plasticity. To the extent that coaches’ interactions not only affect athlete’s brains but perhaps also rewire them, this poses a new dimension of responsibility. This is what I have referred to as the “neuroethics of coaching” (Fry, 2013).

Summary

Part IV has emphasized factors that lie outside the conscious awareness of coaches, but which influence coaches’ judgments and decision making. This lack of self-transparency points to the

importance of the accountability of coaches, and suggests that, in the face of a modern-day cult of coaching, coaches, like all of us, are human, all too human.

Conclusion

There is much that is valuable in contemporary philosophy of coaching. At the same time, there are depths yet to be plumbed. This daunting task requires making connections across philosophical disciplines, and incorporating the empirical findings of the natural and social sciences. In this chapter, I have outlined a few directions that such inquiries and analyses might take. In doing so, I have examined coaching in the light of ethical, epistemic, and metaphysical considerations. These considerations take us beyond what I termed “coaching philosophies” to a full-blown philosophy of coaching. I also looked at social scientific and neurobiological considerations that ground our philosophical analyses in our social situatedness and embodied nature. This provided a context for coaching and the philosophy of coaching. In particular, it allowed me to reveal how what is experienced as manifest in coaching experience occurs against an inchoate background.

The philosophy of coaching as presented in this chapter is a many-layered discipline. Those with a pragmatic bent may be satisfied simply with what “works”; that is, that which secures a good win:loss ratio. But philosopher also seeks to understand. Taking this road will be unsettling for some, as it will challenge preconceived ideas that are widely shared. But as any coach worth her salt will know, the easy way is not the path to transformation and growth.

Notes

- 1 For an explication of “perennial philosophy,” see Flanagan (2002), who in turn draws on Wilfred Sellars.
- 2 Phil Jackson coached professional basketball teams to a record 11 National Basketball Association championships. Still, only late in his coaching career did he emerge from a cloud of doubt about his coaching ability. Critics said that Jackson’s teams should have won titles, given that players like Michael Jordan, Scottie Pippen, Shaquille O’Neal, and Kobe Bryant have filled his teams’ rosters.
- 3 To some extent, the notion of instrumental goodness, as conceived here, has a natural home in sports. The members of a team and the coach depend on each other. There is a sense of instrumental goodness that applies to each one when each one is contributing to a common goal. However, when individual goals or goals of a sub-unit predominate, individuals become separated from a common purpose. When instrumentality becomes the primary criterion of evaluation, the temptation may be to view the members of the supporting cast as potentially replaceable “cogs in a machine.” I am indebted here to Brian Schrag.
- 4 This is not to suggest that we should take it for granted that a coach will be either a role model in a normative sense or a “sage.” See Feezell (2013).
- 5 I am indebted to Mike McNamee for prompting the way that I have framed the issue as one of epistemic virtue.
- 6 According to Kretchmar (2013), as participants grow older and advance through the ranks, the right to play meets the growing relevance of other factors. In particular, at the collegiate level, the pursuit of excellence assumes special relevance.
- 7 In elaborating on various positions in the next few pages, I am especially indebted to, and recommend, the introduction to the philosophy of mind by John Searle (2004). See also John Heil (2013).
- 8 See Searle (2004, pp. 6–27) for a succinct discussion of Descartes’ views on mind and body.
- 9 See, for example, Searle (2002).
- 10 See Searle (1997), in which Chalmers stated that he was “agnostic” (p. 165) as to whether panpsychism was the correct position to hold, and added: “I do argue that panpsychism is not as unreasonable as is often supposed, and that there is no knockdown argument against it” (“Appendix”: “An Exchange with David Chalmers,” p. 166).

- 11 See Martin Buber's (1970) classic, *I and Thou*.
- 12 I am indebted to Mike McNamee for his helpful suggestions here.
- 13 Klein and Kahneman have had something of a rapprochement, and have even collaborated on a paper. But their emphases remain different.
- 14 Note the trend for even NBA head coaches to have a wizened veteran on the sidelines. For example, Phil Jackson had his Tex Winter.
- 15 I borrow the designation "hidden brain" from author and National Public Radio social science reporter Shankar Vedantam (2010).

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