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Academic Paper

What makes a ‘good’ coach? How stakeholder groups understand the virtues of a coach

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Abstract

This study explores the virtues needed to be a good coach. In contrast to the considerable focus on competencies, there has been little discussion about what the character traits of a coach should be. We therefore explored what key stakeholders in coaching understood about the virtues of coaches. Experienced coaches and clients (predominantly from a workplace context) were interviewed and the data analysed by reflexive thematic analysis. This identified six virtues: wisdom, temperance, courage, loyalty, non-judgemental and attentive, which were made up of 22 components. This provides a helpful framework for professional reflection and the training and development of coaches, as well as future research.

Keywords

Coaching, virtue, phronesis, coaching education, coaching training

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Introduction

The increasing evidence that coaching can provide benefits to organisations (Jones, Woods, & Guillaume, 2016; Wang, Lai, Xu, & McDowall, 2022) is associated with a growth in demand for coaching. This, in turn, has resulted in an increasing requirement for educational and training programmes; the executive coaching certification market is growing significantly (11.3% compound annual growth rate) and is estimated to reach US\$27 billion by 2032 (Future Market Insights, 2022).

In general these programmes, based on the disciplines of psychology and business (Maritz, 2013), focus predominantly on developing knowledge, skills capabilities and behaviour for practice (Segers, Vloeberghs, Henderickx, & Inceoglu, 2011). Whilst these features of education are important, a further aspect that this publication considers is what virtues a coach should have; what character is needed to be a good coach?

In this paper we understand a ‘good’ coach using a virtues framework (MacIntyre, 2007). In this approach something is recognised as good if it fulfils its moral or ultimate purpose (*telos*), which has both functional and moral aspects. Thus a good coach is one that achieves a goal that is both ethically and practically good (George & Rose, 2024). Virtues are character traits that matter because they enable individuals to work towards the moral purpose of their occupation, and so achieve excellence in their practice as well as tapping into the internal goods (benefits) associated with the accomplished performance of that practice (MacIntyre, 2007).

An understanding of the virtues has been applied to other professions and occupations, including medicine, academia and management, to foster a professional identity and excellence of practice, as well as providing a framework for ethical decision making and for training and education (Scalzo, Akrivou, & Fernández González, 2022; George & Rose, 2023; George, Urch, & Cribb, 2023). However, there has been little research on what virtues are needed to be a good coach to support the development of these virtues in educational programmes.

The research question for this study was: *How do those with experience of coaching understand the virtues that are needed to be a good coach?* In this paper we first examine our understanding of virtues using both a classical and contemporary psychological perspective. We describe a study in which a sample of both experienced coaches and coaching clients explored what virtues are needed to be a good coach, and discuss the implications for coaches and their training.

Literature Review

Our starting point derives from the Aristotelian philosophy of virtue ethics (Aristotle, 2009). This understands individuals to have a moral purpose (*telos*) that they should strive to achieve. For example, the moral purpose of coaching might be described as “to enable the flourishing of people through development of agency, self-awareness and identity” (George & Rose, 2024). Achieving this would represent both a practically and morally good outcome.

A virtue is a type of character trait or disposition that the individual has which enables them to achieve their moral purpose (MacIntyre, 2007; Annas, 2011). The four cardinal virtues described by Greek philosophers are temperance, courage, justice and applied wisdom (*phronesis*) (Grayling, 2019; Plato, 2021). While the four cardinal virtues have been a consistent feature of most virtues frameworks, there is no definitive list of virtues; virtues need to be understood in a societal and individual context (Kingham, 2017).

Virtues frameworks have been used to understand the nature of professions or occupations (Oakley & Cocking, 2001), including medicine (Pellegrino & Thomasma, 1993; Arthur, Kristjánsson, Thomas, et al., 2015), law (Arthur et al., 2014) and academic leadership (George & Rose, 2023). This approach helps articulate the essential nature of an occupation, as well as how to achieve excellence (rather than just competency) (George et al., 2023). This includes understanding how to develop the internal goods or benefit (in contrast to external goods such as money or fame) that a skilled practitioner receives through the practice of that occupation (MacIntyre, 2007).

As a disposition, virtues are persistent and reliable and form characteristic deep features of an individual (Annas, 2011). They are therefore more than just behaviours or actions which are external and observable. An individual who is generous can be described as such even when they are not performing a generous action, while a person whose character is not generous may still perform a generous action for ulterior motives (Annas, 2011). Virtues lie on a spectrum with an optimal ‘golden mean’ (Aristotle, 2009). For example, cowardice and foolhardiness are the (unvirtuous) extremes of courage.

The nature of the virtue has to be considered in light of the moral purpose and context. While both a coach and a soldier can be courageous, their courage will be expressed differently. Virtues do not exist in isolation but work together (Annas, 2011; De Caro & Vaccarezza, 2020). This requires orchestration, the key virtue in this respect being *phronesis* (applied wisdom) which enables an individual to deploy their virtues to best effect (Bachmann, Habisch, & Dierksmeier, 2018; Malik, Conroy, & Turner, 2020).

Virtues versus values

Given the contemporary focus on individual and organisational values (Arieli, Sagiv, & Roccas, 2020), it is important to distinguish between ‘virtues’ and ‘values’ given both are used when referring to an individual, and the same word (such as honesty) can be used as an example of both. Values are moral beliefs used to provide rationale or motivation to actions (Oyserman, 2012; Crossan, Mazutis, & Seijts, 2013). Personal values represent what is important to individuals (Bardi & Schwartz, 2003). Values can lead people to make destructive or morally bad choices (Illies & Reiter-Palmon, 2008) (after all, racial supremacists have values, albeit reprehensible). Values describe aspirations; an organisation can have equality as a value that is genuinely held but not achieved. Finally, values are externally attributed to an action or object (we value a behaviour in others) (Lambek, 2008). In contrast, virtues are morally good and describe the internal and consistent character traits (Annas, 2011). As an individual’s behaviour flows from their character, we focus in this study on understanding how virtues guide coaching practice.

Positive psychology and virtues

Positive psychology seeks to develop positive aspects of human behaviour (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, 2011). To this end it has explored the idea that ‘good character can be cultivated’ (Peterson & Seligman, 2004: 3), leading to an exploration of virtues using a psychological rather than philosophical understanding of character. Peterson and Seligman (2004) developed a classification system of 24 character strengths and six virtues in the general population (Table 1). This was not viewed as a taxonomy ‘based on a deep theory that explains the domain of concern’ (Peterson & Seligman, 2004: 6), but a way of identifying, defining and distinguishing strengths and virtues. In their work virtues are defined as ‘core characteristics’ and character strengths as ‘the psychological ingredients – processes and mechanisms – that define the virtues’ (Peterson & Seligman, 2004: 15). This was used to develop widely applied and validated psychometric tests of character strengths and virtues (McGrath & Wallace, 2021).

Table 1: Six Virtues and the 24 Corresponding Character Strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004)

Virtues	Character Strengths				
Wisdom	Creativity	Curiosity	Judgement	Love of Learning	Perspective
Courage	Bravery	Perseverance	Honesty	Zest	
Humanity	Love	Kindness	Social Intelligence		
Justice	Teamwork	Fairness	Leadership		
Temperance	Forgiveness	Humility	Prudence	Self-Regulation	
Transcendence	Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence	Gratitude	Hope	Humour	Spirituality

This approach does not integrate some of the philosophical understandings of virtue, for example emphasising the individual apart from the community (Kristjánsson, 2010; Fowers, 2012). The more of a virtue or strength you possess the better, distinct from the concept of the golden mean. Virtues are analysed as independent variables, lacking the interconnectedness central to the philosophical understanding (Banicki, 2014). In addition, in positive psychology virtues are considered descriptive and not normative (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), resulting in an apparently oxymoronic situation in which virtues, a moral concept, are considered value neutral (Banicki, 2014; Fowers, Carroll, Leonhardt, & Cokelet, 2021).

However, positive psychology does provide an approach for thinking about virtues through a psychological lens. It has been used to examine the nature of virtues in professions such as medicine (Arthur, Kristjánsson, Thomas, et al., 2015), nursing (Kristjánsson, Varghese, Arthur, & Moller, 2017), education (Arthur, Kristjánsson, Cooke, Brown, & Carr, 2015), law (Arthur et al., 2014) and the military (Arthur, Walker, & Thoma, 2018). In this study we draw on both philosophical and psychological understandings of virtues.

Research has explored how a coach's background or skills (de Haan, Culpin, & Curd, 2011; Bozer, Sarros, & Santora, 2014) and the personality match between coach and client (a product of the coach's character) (de Haan, Duckworth, Birch, & Jones, 2013) influence coaching effectiveness. Research has explored how to coach virtues or character strengths in clients (McQuaid, 2017; Harzer, 2020). However, we have found no publications on the range of virtues that a coach should have, though the literature does describe the importance of individual virtues including courage and self-awareness (Kilburg, 2001; Berman, 2019; Wood & Lomas, 2021; Carden, Passmore, & Jones, 2022). There is therefore a need to develop a better understanding of the virtues needed by a good coach, so that training and education programmes can seek to develop them (Pennock & O'Rourke, 2017; Newstead, Dawkins, Macklin, & Martin, 2020; Pike, Hart, Paul, Lickona, & Clarke, 2021).

Research Methodology

This research is situated in a critical realist orientation that assumes that our knowledge of an objective world is subjective and a continually changing social construct (Bhaskar, 2007; Archer et al., 2016; Vincent & O'Mahoney, 2018). This is appropriate as an understanding of virtues is culturally and contextually situated, while having an existence (even if not material) that influences individuals. We understand this reality through our descriptions of it. The critical realist orientation distinguishes between observable events and the unobservable mechanisms that give rise to them (Rose, Spinks, & Canhoto, 2024). The research design was exploratory, seeking to identify the virtues relevant to a good coach as a basis for further investigation.

Sample

The sample consisted of 13 experienced coaches - defined as an accredited coach practitioner more than 5 years after qualification (Table 2) and 11 clients of coaches (Table 3). The researchers used the concept of 'information power', which requires an assessment of when enough data has been gathered to fulfil the study aim in order to determine when to stop sample recruitment (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016). Convenience and snowball sampling were used to access participants. Interviews were analysed independent of any relationship between participants. No clients of the researchers were interviewed. Pseudonyms were used to anonymise but personalise the sample. The clients all received their coaching in a workplace or career context, and predominantly held relatively senior positions. The coaches also practised as business or executive coaches (though some also coached in other contexts, such as supporting women).

Table 2: Summary of Experienced Coaches Interviewed

Pseudonym	Gender identified as	Years since qualification	Accreditation
Julie	Female	18	AC
Nancy	Female	16	AC, EMCC, ICF
Edith	Female	20	AC
Alice	Female	18	ICF
Mary	Female	10	AoEC
Peter	Male	15	EMCC
Sally	Female	10	APECS
Brian	Male	16	AC
Aoife	Female	9	AC
Nick	Male	5	AC
Steve	Male	16	EMCC
Emma	Female	20	EMCC
Penny	Female	14	ICF

Abbreviations: AC; Association for Coaching, AoEC; Academy of Executive Coaching, APECS; Association for Professional Executive Coaching and Supervision, EMCC; European Mentoring and Coaching Council, ICF; International Coaching Federation.

Table 3: Summary of Clients Interviewed

Pseudonym	Gender identified as	Business sector	Position
John	Male	Healthcare	Medical Leadership
Muna	Female	Charity	Chief Executive
Rebecca	Female	Hospitality	Career transition
Keith	Male	Higher Education	Dean
Charlotte	Female	Healthcare	HR Director
Hamad	Male	Healthcare	Doctor
Christian	Male	Advertising	Creative Director
Claudia	Female	Pharmaceutical	Scientist
Megan	Female	Charity	Chief Executive
Clare	Female	Charity	Chief Executive
Leanne	Female	Higher Education	Chief People Officer

Data Collection

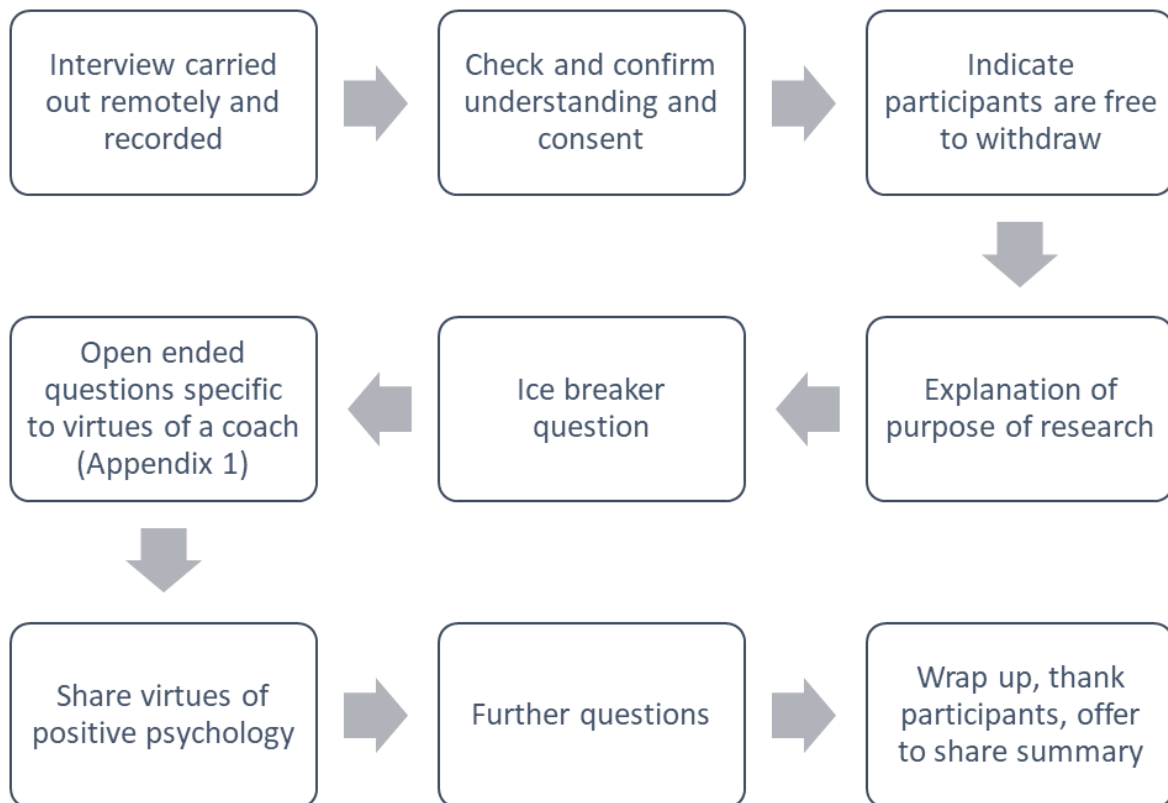
The data collection method involved semi-structured interviews with coaches and clients (the client is the person being coached, rather than the one commissioning the service). All interviews (typically 60 minutes) were conducted and recorded using Zoom. An interview guide was designed to define the interviewee's understanding of the nature of virtues and to ask open questions around the research question. The interviewer guided the discussion to concentrate on virtues rather than other aspects of a coach's characteristics or skills. An outline of the interview process, are shown in Figure 1 and the relevant questions in Appendix 1. The guide was piloted and modified before use. Towards the end of the interview the interviewer shared a diagram showing the 24 character strengths of Positive Psychology (Table 1) as a prompt to elicit further responses on the virtues of coaches. These interviewees were also asked questions not directed at this research question, which are reported elsewhere (George & Rose, 2024).

Data Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed using Otter transcription software and manually checked. The transcripts were pseudo-anonymised at the time. Data was coded using NVivo software. Thematic analysis was deemed an appropriate technique as it is 'the systematic process of coding, examining of meaning and provision of a description of the social reality through the creation of theme' and considers both 'latent' and 'manifest' content within the data (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016: 100). A six phase process of reflexive thematic analysis was used to

identify and analyse patterns and themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). This was not a sequential series of actions but involved considerable iteration and repetition. The researcher categorised the codes into themes based on an understanding of the theoretical natures of virtues. Research quality was assured using the trustworthiness criteria of Lincoln and Guba (1985). Confirmability and credibility were assured via cross-checking of data outputs of the themes that were generated.

Figure 1: Flow diagram showing the process of the semi-structured interview



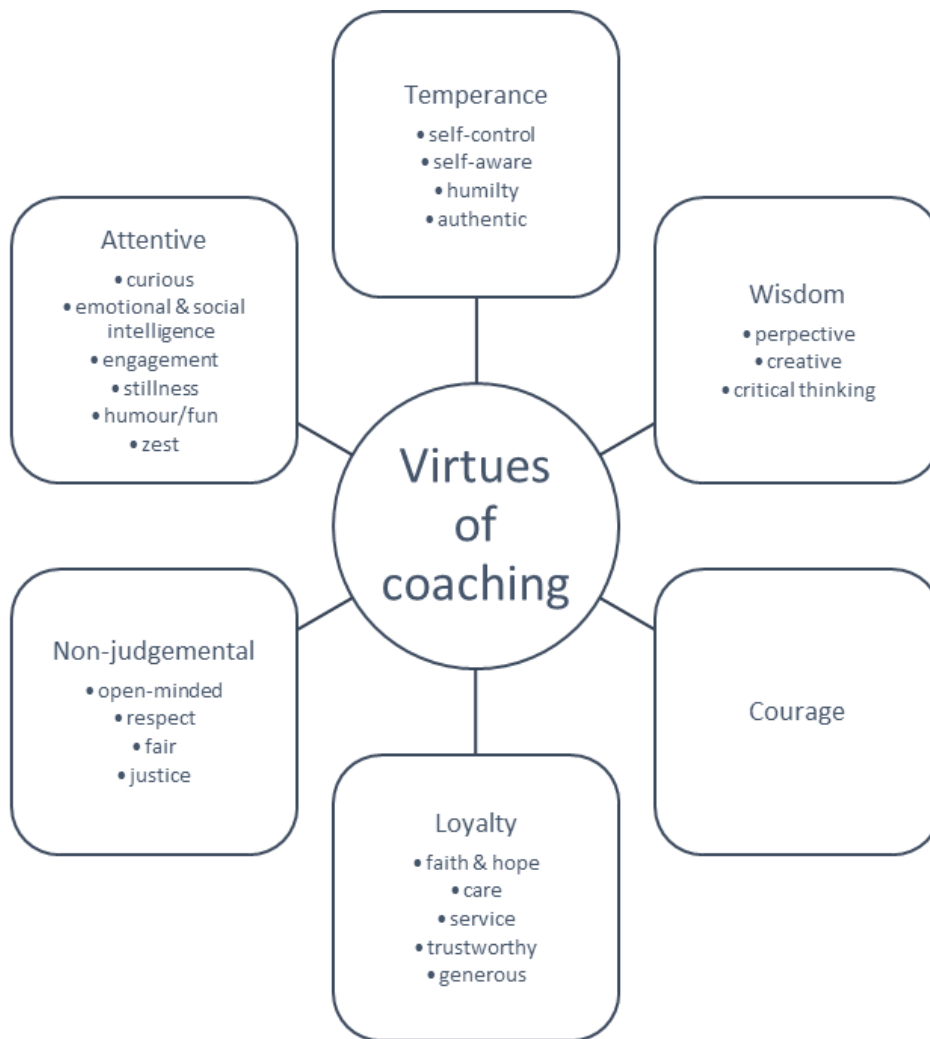
Ethical Research Considerations

Ethical considerations included confidentiality, privacy, safety and prevention of distress during the study (Rose et al., 2024). Ethical approval was obtained through the University of Reading (SREC-HBS-20211004-ANGE2465). Participants were given an information sheet outlining the study, had the opportunity to ask questions and signified their consent through signing a consent form. All participants were given a summary of the research findings once the study was completed.

Results

The interviews with experienced coaches and clients explored the virtues that participants viewed as essential for good coaches. Analysing the transcripts resulted in the development of six themes (Figure 2) that were identified as virtues based on both the classical understanding of the cardinal virtues and the virtues and character strengths of positive psychology (as discussed above). Each of the six virtues were composed of a number of component elements (Figure 2). We will discuss the results in relation to the six identified virtues of coaches and explore sub-components as relevant. We identify participants as Co = coach, Cl = client.

Figure 2: The Six Identified Virtues of Coaching, and their Characteristic Components



Temperance

Interviewees cited the need for the virtue of temperance for coaches, in particular self-control or self-regulation. This includes not letting personal events intervene (one coach talked about going through a divorce, another a bereavement, and their clients not ‘having a clue’). It was also to remember “the client does the work” (Penny Co), and having the self-control not to jump in. The self-control allows for a detachment from the client and an objectivity about what is said. Coaches were described as “orchestrating process, they are not in the process. They are not the agents” (Megan CI).

Clients saw self-regulation as critical, valuing the ability not to be ‘fazed’ or ‘scandalised’ by what is said. However, clients also described valuing the confidence that their coaches have. Temperance means “that the ego gets left at the door” (Julie Co). Clients similarly described the need for a coach to “forego [their] ego and a lot of emotions that [they] would like to show and feel” [Megan CI]. Self-regulation helps the coach to be dispassionate, which was valued by clients, and requires humility. Self-control and humility are connected to self-awareness, and coaches cited their need to be self-aware and to continually develop this; “the more self-aware I become the less self-aware I realise I am” (Sally Co).

The need to be authentic was key, “I would be gutted, if somebody said that I wasn’t authentic” [Aoife Co]. This was also referred to as honesty. However, there is a decision as to how coaches

present to their clients; “I think we are different for every client we coach although we show up authentically, so for a client who may have themselves a lighter touch to their style, we may show up with more lightness” (Nancy Co).

These components (humility, self-aware, self-control and authenticity) can be viewed as part of temperance. However, there is a tension in this virtue for coaches; authenticity means showing up with their character, recognised by coaches and clients as vital, “I wouldn't want to have a coach who just sort of did that psychiatrist thing of never putting themselves into the frame” (Keith Cl). However, leaving the ego at the door, and maintaining self-control, can result in an absence of character. This indicates that a coach has to make a decision about how to show up and dial up or down characteristics as appropriate.

Wisdom

Wisdom was seen as a virtue distinct from expertise and knowledge. Indeed, unbridled expertise was described as a barrier to good coaching. However, interviewees found it difficult to define wisdom. Wisdom was described as coming from experience and being open-minded “a mindset that isn't fixed in one way, you can see things from different perspectives” (Brian Co). It was something that coaches recognised in others and which they say their clients recognised in them. One coach used wisdom to enable her to choose how she turned up to her clients, saying “... wisdom enables me to be many different things to different people [...] one size doesn't fit all” (Mary Co).

Related to wisdom are the components of perspective, creative and critical thinking. Clients recognised that being creative provided coaches with a different way of thinking. As one client described:

“He demonstrates as a different way of seeing it, I don't know that I necessarily automatically see it his way. But I think his ability just to literally look at something in a completely different way and find an entirely different way of kind of understanding it is really helpful” (John Cl).

Courage

Most coaches indicated that courage or bravery are important for coaching. However, they were less clear what they meant by courage, or why they had to be brave. They talked about the need to challenge clients, to look honestly at situations, to receive uncomfortable information and to deal with emotions. However, answers often segued from why the coach needed to be courageous to saying that the client needed courage; “... it [is] about being brave. I think people have to be brave to be the best they can be” (Mary Co). Clients identified courage as important, especially when challenging, though less universally than coaches.

One coach compared her courage with that of a paediatric surgeon, indicating that the bravery the surgeon needed was greater than that she needed to coach them. While the nature and extent of her courage is different, the ability to exhibit that virtue was important for her client's development of courage. This need to possess a virtue to help others develop it was not confined to courage but was seen across a range of other virtues, including self-sufficiency, confidence and curiosity:

“I am coaching [a] consultant surgeon at [a children's hospital] [...] and [...] for this individual, if they have a hard day at work, that's very, very different to me having a hard day at work. [...] if they lose a child on the operating table that is a hard day at work. And I could say I've had a hard [day] but the difference is enormous. [...] But [...] can I coach this consultant [...] to be more courageous? Yeah, I can. But do I equate my degree of courage with [...] what they've got to deal with? No, because I'm not dealing with life.... I would say I need to have an

understanding of courage. But for me being brave, persevering, honest, and having zest is very different ...” (Sally Co).

Clients also talked about the importance of courage, though it was less prominent in their responses than for coaches, and several had not thought of courage as important until the topic was raised. One client indicated that courage allowed the coach to react appropriately to difficult information, drawing an analogy with babies in a cot;

“It makes the baby [...] even more upset if they can feel [...] the panic that [...] the mum feels, it goes back to them in this really unhelpful cycle. [...] you're saying stuff, which is really hard to say, or to name or just to air. And [the coach] don't flinch” (Megan Cl).

Loyalty

A key virtue that was identified through the interviews was that of loyalty. There were several components contributing to this virtue (Figure 2), but it is best summed up as being on the side of the client; “...you're not in love with them. But you're definitely, 'I'm batting for you... I'm on your team'” (Nick Co). It is not friendship, but the coach cares deeply about the outcome for their client. However, clients also value the objective, independent, perspective, “I feel like yeah, she was on my side [...] She was helping me. She wanted the best for me. But [...] not on my side as in fighting my corner” (Rebecca Cl).

Loyalty requires the coach to have faith in, and hope for, their client. They must believe that the client has the resources in them to benefit. “Every piece of coaching is grounded in the hope, in the expectation, [...] that the clients will find something of value in themselves out of it and will spring board that in some way” (Nancy Co). Faith and hope is an important enabler for the coach, giving them optimism that coaching will make a difference and confidence to be willing to live with ambiguity. It enables them to persevere, even when the client “is wanting to throw the towel in and give up” (Julie Co). The belief that change is possible can reframe the viewpoint of the client:

“All that positive psychology stuff is really interesting. Because often those inward conversations that people might be having are pessimistic. [...] by feeding back ... 'If you didn't think we were all doomed, what [...] might you be doing differently?' Just to do some of that reframing” (Aoife Co).

The faith and hope of the coach, and their confidence for their client, are also a factor in the client's success, “I needed to feel that they were hopeful for me that I would be able to get through it” (Hamad Cl).

Coaches are also disposed to care. This can manifest itself in compassion or empathy, and in some cases love of the client; “Sometimes I just say spontaneously, I love my clients, because I actually do. It's what I feel, that allows me to do my job” (Penny Co). Others talked “about bringing humanity into the workplace” (Brian Co). Regardless of the way in which it was evident, coaches shared the ability to care, which was appreciated by clients; “kindness and caring I felt very much” (Claudia Cl). There was a recognition that this needed to be controlled, many of the coaches came from a caring profession and had to learn not to help clients by ‘fixing things’. The coach is also generous to their client, which was contrasted to be self-centred:

“... a highly self-centred person is unlikely, I think, to be a good coach. So the opposite in this case of self-centred, and opinionated might be what? Might be generous, good hearted, warm hearted, feeling a connection with humanity” (Emma Co).

Clients said that their coach needed to be caring. Some used the term ‘kind’, others did not feel that was the right term. They saw the need for coaches to be empathetic, compassionate and also

respectful of the client:

“But actually, in coaching, you can't always be nice, [...] I think you have to be respectful. But the opposite of kindness is [...] you're horrible, I suppose. But you wouldn't expect somebody to be horrible to you. But you'd expect them to be respectful in those discussions... And that can still be caring, compassionate” (Clare CI).

The final component is trustworthy. Trust in a coaching relationship is the product of many factors, but trustworthiness is a foundational character trait, something that was essential; “It's important to have ... trust and have that relationship, or otherwise you can't go to places that you need to go to” (Christian CI). The ability to engender trust is necessary to create both the relationship and the safe space for coaching to happen.

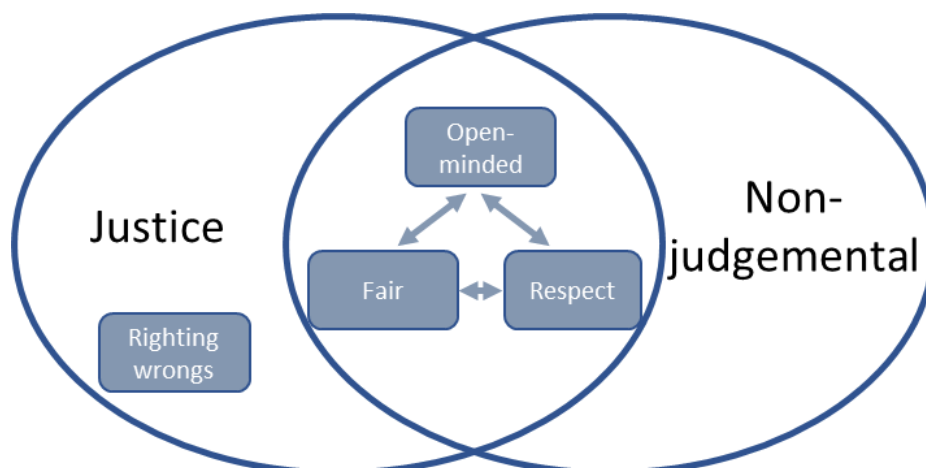
Non-judgemental

The virtue of judgement produced a strong reaction amongst interviewees; coaches and clients considered it obvious that a coach should be non-judgemental. A substantial proportion of interviewees saw the need to be a critical thinker. There was an understanding of the distinction between being “not judging of others. But having a level of judgement” (Emma Co). Judgement, together with critical thinking, is an aspect of wisdom (see above).

The antipathy towards being judgemental is so strong that the virtue is named in the negative; non-judgemental. When exploring further what it means to be non-judgemental, the interviewees discussed the characteristics of open-minded, fair and respect (Figure 3). These also were seen as part of justice, and are linked to treating everyone as a unique individual; “...so to be non-judgmental, ... every individual that I meet is, and seeing them as, a unique human being” (Julie Co), “...it's quite a thing when someone ... has that respectfulness towards you” (Megan CI). Being non-judgemental in this context is rooted in justice rather than, for example, not making a decision or having an opinion.

While most of justice would fall within the virtue of ‘non-judgemental’, a minority of coaches saw their role to be a champion for their clients and to right the wrongs being done to them. One felt that they were “putting on the boxing gloves on [their] behalf and wanting to protect [them]” (Penny Co). While clients could see the coaches as helping them deal with wrongs, and wanted the coaches to be on their side, they expected them to give support rather than fight their cause. This response of the coaches to ‘right wrongs’ is an aspect of justice that does not fall within ‘non-judgemental’ (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Components of non-judgemental and justice



Attentive

The ability to be a good listener was a highly regarded skill for coaches. However, it is not a character trait. When asked what characteristic is required to be a good listener, the vast majority stated that curiosity was vital. Coaches need to be curious both in terms of what is being said in the moment, and being interested in individuals:

“... another [...] characteristic [...] of a coach [is] that burning curiosity about other people, about themselves, about what happens in between and then, from that, comes a whole load of [...] skills and capability like listening...” (Brian Co).

“So I don’t think I’ve ever worked with somebody as curious as she is. And I’ve loved watching her do that. So be curious about something I’ve said or a face I’ve pulled, and then exploring that, and maybe not finding very much and letting it go” (Muna Cl).

The curiosity of a coach was described as being in the service of the client, rather than the coach, and driving an open exploration:

“... the curiosity to ‘problem solve’ is almost in the ... consultancy model, ... you’re asking questions to confirm or deny certain things, and in your mind is a map of where it’s going. ... whereas I think curiosity for [coaches] is genuine exploration without a pre-configured map in the background” (Steve Co).

While curiosity was seen as key, other components of this virtue are important. Coaches and their clients talked about the need for emotional and social intelligence, stillness and engagement. This collection of components form ‘attentive’, a virtue that helps make a good listener.

Another skill is the ability to build relationships, which involves different character traits. Many coaches identified with the need to have humour, fun or zest, as part of their coaching style. Some saw these as fundamental, others as a tool that could be useful to build relations or to unlock a situation. Coaches have to be very attentive to the needs of their client, matching their behaviour accordingly.

Mirroring Virtues

One area explored by both coaches and clients was whether it was essential for a coach to exhibit a particular virtue in order to support the client develop that virtue in themselves. Many considered it was necessary, or at least helpful, for the client if the coach exercised that virtue. For example, one client when discussing forgiveness reported:

“She does have to have that quality. This is all really subtle stuff we’re talking about. But if she doesn’t have that, how would she inspire me to forgive myself?” (Muna Cl)

Some were clear that they were not copying their coaches, though others used the term mirroring, resonance or contagion:

“So there’s something about how to, to be able to mirror courage and bravery that my client can resonate with, from which they can build confidence to do something” (Edith Co).

What was clear, as with the example of a surgeon’s courage, is that the coach’s virtue would be expressed in a different context to that of the client, and so would manifest differently. However, the underlying virtue was recognisable (and transmissible) between these different contexts.

Which Virtues Resonated?

Not all the virtues and components of virtues resonated equally between interviewees. While accepting that the frequency of description does not necessarily equate to importance (Braun & Clarke, 2022), the researchers used the frequency and detail with which virtues were discussed to identify which virtues resonated most with experienced coaches and their clients (Table 4). Different interviewees prioritised different virtues and components, but this study was not designed to quantify this.

Table 4: Resonant Virtues and Components of Virtues

Authenticity	Faith & Hope	Social and emotional intelligence
Care	Humility	Trustworthy
Courage	Non-judgemental	Wisdom
Curiosity	Self-control	

Out of the six virtues and 22 components of virtues (see Figure 2), the eleven that had strongest resonance with interviewees (as evidenced by a subjective assessment of frequency and detail of description) are shown in alphabetical order. The virtues are shown in bold.

Discussion

This research looked at the understanding of what virtues are needed to be a good coach, drawing on the perspectives of both the practitioner and the client. In general, there was good alignment between these two perspectives, though coaches gave considerably more prominence to the virtue of courage.

The six virtues of coaches identified are shown in Table 5, which compares them to the four cardinal virtues and the virtues of positive psychology. All the cardinal virtues have their equivalents within the six virtues of coaches. However, Aristotle also described other virtues, such as magnanimity and magnificence, that have little relevance to coaching (Aristotle, 2009) and he would not have recognised virtues or components of the virtues of coaching, such as non-judgemental and humility. These differences highlight the contingent nature of virtues (MacIntyre, 2007; Kinghorn, 2017). There are also clear connections between loyalty and the positive psychology virtues of humanity and transcendence (kindness, hope) and attentiveness and character strengths in wisdom and humanity (curiosity and social intelligence).

Table 5: Comparison of Virtues of Coaches, the Cardinal Virtues and the Virtues of Positive Psychology

Six Virtues of Coaches	Four Cardinal Virtues	Virtues of Positive Psychology
Temperance	Temperance	Temperance
Wisdom	Wisdom	Wisdom
Courage	Courage	Courage
Loyalty		
Non-judgemental	Justice	Justice
Attentive		
		Humanity
		Transcendence

There is correspondence between the six virtues of coaches, and their components, and the virtues and character strengths of positive psychology. This is not surprising as positive psychology and coaching developed in a similar culture sharing a humanistic perspective. There are differences related to the moral purpose of coaching. Thus coaches and their clients valued loyalty and authenticity, while strengths such as teamwork, leadership, spirituality and forgiveness were not seen as important.

While there is no literature concerning the general nature of virtues needed to be a good coach, there has been consideration of individual virtues. For example, the literature describes the need for coaches to be courageous, to confront their client (Hardingham, 2004), to help them adhere to a learning process (Kilburg, 2001), to show them the reality of their situation (Brotman, Liberi, & Wasylyshyn, 1998), and to 'speak truth to power' (Berman, 2019). A survey indicated that 77% of experienced coaches saw courage as essential for both good coaching and mastery of coaching, to overcome fears and be authentic (Steinfeldt, 2015). One study suggested that coaches experienced the need for courage at different stages; becoming a coach, the development of skills and self-awareness and at critical moments in coaching (Wood & Lomas, 2021). Self-awareness has also been seen as important, though considered a competency rather than a virtue (Carden et al., 2022).

The relationship between coach and client is recognised as a vital component of successful coaching (Graßmann, Schölmerich, & Schermuly, 2020). One key aspect of this, drawing on the client centred approach of Rogers (1961), is a coach's unconditional positive regard and active listening (Jarosz, 2023). These capabilities of a coach are often described as skills (Jarosz, 2023), though there are clear connections to the virtues of non-judgemental and attentiveness that form part of the six virtues of coaches.

The relationship between skills and virtues is contested, and indeed confused as often the same word can be used to describe a virtue and a skill. Some commentators have suggested that virtues are a type of skill (Annas, 1995; Stichter, 2007). Others have argued that virtues are distinct from skills, as skills are about knowing how to do something while virtues are about knowing to do something (Small, 2021). This is an important distinction, a virtue is aligned to the moral purpose, while a skill (such as listening attentively) need not be (it can be an isolated competency existing in the absence of a virtue). A skill that is driven by a virtue to contribute to the moral purpose can form part of that virtue. For example, a coach that has the virtue of non-judgemental will exercise appropriate cognitive, motor, emotional and social skills, enabling and contributing to the coach being non-judgemental. However, the same skills can be employed without a virtue; the coach could use them to avoid engagement with their client.

Consideration of the virtues of a coach, rather than just skills, is helpful as a coach exercises their virtues in deciding what they should do. The exercise of virtues also allows the coach to engage with the internal goods or benefits that result from the skilful practice of coaching (MacIntyre, 2007).

The Benefit of a Virtues Framework for Coaching

An understanding of the virtues needed for coaching are important in at least four respects. First, they provide a basis for self, peer or directed reflection. Second, they can be used for development of ethical thinking. Third, a virtues framework allows a coach to develop an excellence in practice focussed on the moral purpose of coaching. Finally, an understanding of the moral purpose and virtues of coaching can be translated to their client's situation.

A virtues based framework for professional reflection requires an individual to consider their moral purpose and the virtues that are needed to achieve it. This has been proposed for professional reflection by doctors on whether they are appropriately deploying their virtues to best effect, and helping them connect to the internal goods specifically associated with the practice of medicine (George et al., 2023). Providers of coach training and development courses could benefit from developing such a reflective framework for their participants.

This paper helps develop an understanding of the virtues, as expressed by coaches and clients, which is a necessary step to developing such a framework. Another key component is to develop an understanding of the moral purpose (*telos*) of coaching that the virtues enable. An initial

exploration proposes that it is to enable the flourishing of people through development of agency, self-awareness and identity (George & Rose, 2024).

A virtues framework provides an approach to help coaches navigate ethical dilemmas. Coaches are taught to adhere to ethical codes (EMCC & AC, 2021; ICF, 2021). These are guidelines that are important to follow. However, they can give little support in situations that are novel, unforeseen or where guidelines and regulations clash. In these settings virtue ethics are an alternative approach.

Most coach training is designed to equip people with skills that make them competent practitioners, rather than reflect on how to develop excellence. Assessments are often designed to set threshold standards to ensure practitioners are 'safe' and 'good enough'. Passing the assessment can unfortunately become the purpose of education, which inevitably means being an excellent practitioner is of secondary importance. This is not to say that individual teachers do not inspire and demand excellence, or that individual students do not strive for excellence, but that they do this despite the curriculum. A virtues framework, with its emphasis on moral purpose, demands that the practitioner is as good as they can be.

Limitations of Study and Future Directions

The study undertaken is helpful in identifying a set of virtues that we propose are relevant to a good coach. Testing this proposition will require further quantitative validation. This exploratory study relies on the reports of what coaches and clients believe are important virtues for a good coach. Further research could investigate what virtues coaches use in practice, and this could be done by a combination of psychometric analysis of coaches, coupled with ethnographic analysis of coaching conversations.

The coaching discussed in the interviews predominantly occurred in the workplace setting. It would be interesting to explore the virtues of coaching in other contexts, such as life or health coaching. Consideration should be giving to including wider groups of coaches and clients, as the snowball sampling may have resulted in homophilic selection (Chan, 2020).

Implications for Practice

Understanding and articulating the virtues of coaching – as for other professions – is an important step in the maturation of coaching as a profession. The findings of this study provide insights for institutions developing coaching programmes into the importance of considering the virtues relevant to good coaching and how these may be developed. These can be used as a basis for self and peer reflection, for example in the development of frameworks for supervision. Coaches can also leverage their recognition of their own virtues when working with their clients to aid client understanding and development. In addition, an understanding of the virtues of coaching can complement coaching ethical frameworks, moving from a competency based approach to one that can encourage excellence.

The design of the curriculum for coach education should explicitly consider the virtues needed to be a good coach, and embed pedagogical approaches that encourage their development. In addition, those involved in coach education can become aware of the need to model these virtues in their behaviour and language. In general this is not an explicit goal of most programmes, though there are aspects of character, such as self-awareness, that are developed through coach training (Carden, Jones, & Passmore, 2023).

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Appendix 1

Extract from interview guide with the questions on virtues

An explanation that a trait is some distinguishing quality of characteristic that belongs to a person.

Virtue is a morally good trait that results in a good way of being in the context.

So for example for a soldier it may be important virtue to be brave or courageous.

- What character traits or virtues helps a coach be good?
- When they come up with a character trait then explore the opposite 'what does it look like for a coach not to be courageous?'
- Ask for specific examples of what they mean by character
- What do you think is special about the role of a professional coach?
- Here is a list of virtues that have been produced, there are many lists and this is just one, but if you look at these do any of them ring true?
- What might be your top ones here?

Authorship contribution statement

This study was conceived by AJTG. SR and AJTG co-designed and planned the research. Interviews were carried out by AJTG. Data analysis was carried out by AJTG and SR. Both authors contributed to writing the manuscript. Both authors have approved the final draft.

Data Access Statement

Given the snowballing recruitment strategy, and the details covered in the interview, publication of the transcripts of the interviews would breach confidentiality. Participants were therefore not asked to give consent for sharing the transcripts. The data will therefore, unfortunately, not be accessible.