

Article

The four pillars of Practical Wisdom Coaching

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This paper introduces Practical Wisdom Coaching (PWC), a novel coaching psychology approach grounded in Aristotelian philosophy. By integrating the four pillars of the golden mean (mesotês), practical wisdom (phronesis), tragic flaws (hamartia), and character friendships (philia), PWC offers a holistic and ethically robust framework for personal and professional growth. Unlike traditional coaching methods that prioritise goal attainment and subjective well-being, PWC emphasises the development of moral character and the pursuit of a flourishing life. It addresses the complexities of human behaviour and ethical decision-making, providing a nuanced understanding of clients' unique contexts and challenges. PWC balances character and utility friendships, ensuring ethical guidance while maintaining professional boundaries. By embedding professional ethics directly into the coaching process, PWC helps prevent potential harms from unwise goal setting and fosters long-term well-being and ethical living. This paper highlights the practical applications of Aristotelian thought, introducing novel concepts and methodological approaches that significantly enhance coaching practices and contribute to the holistic development and flourishing of clients.

Keywords: Practical Wisdom Coaching; coaching; phronesis; hamartia; golden mean; friendship.

THIS ARTICLE INTRODUCES Practical Wisdom Coaching (PWC), an innovative approach to coaching psychology grounded in the enduring principles of Aristotelian philosophy. PWC is built on four foundational concepts: the golden mean (*mesotês*), practical wisdom (*phronesis*), tragic flaws (*hamartia*), and character friendships (*philia*). Together, these principles offer a philosophically robust framework for helping clients achieve meaningful personal and professional growth. At its core, PWC promotes flourishing – not merely the pursuit of goals or happiness, but the cultivation of a life where clients optimise their unique potential and align their aspirations with ethical and purposeful living.

Coaching psychologists often navigate the delicate tension between meeting clients' immediate wants and needs and fulfilling their broader professional and ethical responsibilities. Coaching psychology is, after all, partly a service profession:

clients seek help with what matters most to them, and their self-determination must be respected – within reason. However, as scientist-practitioners, coaching psychologists also understand that not all goals are equally good or conducive to flourishing. Positive psychology, with its emphasis on *eudaimonia*, has drawn on Aristotle's insights by recognising that human flourishing encompasses both subjective wellbeing and objective markers of living well. Yet, where positive psychology often emphasises the subjective – how clients feel about their lives – Aristotle placed greater focus on the objective: the actions and qualities that constitute a genuinely good life.

This distinction underscores a central challenge for coaching psychologists. Clients may aspire to goals that are personally meaningful yet ethically problematic or even counterproductive to their flourishing, and/or those around them. For instance, performance virtues such as resilience or ambition

might drive success in harmful endeavours, such as the resilient mafia member whose perseverance serves destructive aims, or the ambitious worker who burns out on their way to the top. A purely goal-focused approach risks endorsing any aspiration that aligns with the client's desires, potentially making coaches complicit in outcomes that undermine wellbeing – for the client, and for others. Good practitioners already work to avoid this, helping clients pursue goals that genuinely support their flourishing and that of those around them. PWC strengthens this process by embedding ethical reflection into the coaching method itself, enabling clients to evaluate their goals through the lens of virtue and flourishing.

Good coaching does not impose values or curtail client autonomy. Instead, it provides a space for critical reflection, allowing clients to explore how their goals align with their deeper values and purpose while considering the broader context of others' flourishing and well-being. PWC equips coaches to honour clients' self-determination while structuring the conversation – through its four pillars – in a way that naturally guides clients to reflect on the broader implications of their aspirations as they set goals. This ensures that goals are pursued in ways that support personal growth, meaningful relationships, and societal benefit. In this way, PWC enables coaches to fulfil their dual responsibility: to help clients achieve what they want while guiding them toward what is truly worth striving for, avoiding the error of reducing what is universally *valuable* to the lowly status of what is merely universally *valued*.

In the sections that follow, this article situates PWC within the broader contexts of coaching psychology and positive psychology, demonstrating how an Aristotelian approach enhances existing methodologies. By balancing respect for client autonomy with a commitment to ethical and purposeful living, PWC provides a transformative model for coaching psychology. It empowers prac-

tioners to serve their clients' aspirations without losing sight of the ultimate aim of the profession: to help clients live well, not just accomplish more.

Positive and Coaching Psychology: Method and outcomes

Coaching psychology has been defined in many ways over the years, helping us to understand what might come under its remit. Some definitions are suggestive of a field narrowly focused on clients' goal achievement. For example, O'Connell and Palmer (2018, p.270) say coaching is '*an outcome-oriented, competence-based approach*'. Whitmore (1992, p. 8) is similarly instrumental, focusing on the outcome of increasing performance, presumably also in relation to some sort of goal: '*unlocking a person's potential to maximise their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them – a facilitation approach*.' A more comprehensive definition is offered by Grant (2003, p.254), but still focused on instrumental goal attainment: '*a collaborative, solution-focused, result-oriented and systematic process in which the coach facilitates the enhancement of life experience and goal attainment in the personal and/or professional life of normal, nonclinical clients*'. While goal attainment is clearly important, this article will explore the other aspects of these definitions, which focus on facilitating others' potential, a much wider remit within which specific goals are nested.

Similarly, definitions of 'coaching psychology' suggest a wider remit than mere goal attainment. The British Psychological Society's definition, adapted from Grant and Palmer (2002) say that it '*is for enhancing well-being and performance in personal life and work domains underpinned by models of coaching grounded in established adult and child learning or psychological theories*' (see Palmer & Whybrow, 2018, p.3). This definition differs from what is arguably a narrow goal-oriented focus and elevates wellbeing alongside performance as the yardstick against which good coaching

should be measured. The Australian Psychological Society go further and say ‘*Coaching Psychology, as an applied positive psychology, draws on and develops established psychological approaches, and can be understood as being the systematic application of behavioural science to the enhancement of life experience, work performance and wellbeing for individuals, groups and organisations who do not have clinically significant mental health issues or abnormal levels of distress*’ (see O’Riordan & Palmer, 2021, p.5). There are two noticeable additions here, which I will now argue are important.

Firstly, a third criterion is added to demark good coaching alongside wellbeing and performance – the enhancement of life experience. This is essential because it suggests that it is the responsibility of the professional to empower clients to improve their lives in measurable ways, rather than simply to help them achieve goals and attain subjective wellbeing (McLoughlin & Kristjánsson, 2025; McLoughlin & Roche, 2023). Indeed, coaching psychology can be more than this. For example, in an extreme case, it is possible to imagine that a client might have a goal such as ‘I want to get promoted to a senior executive position in the next six months’. This is not a wise goal if, for example, it might harm the client’s personal relationships, or physical and mental health. Indeed, it is an anti-social goal if it contributes to a toxic environment at work leading to burnout and lowered job satisfaction, and if it causes emotional distress for their loved ones. For a coaching psychologist to practice ethically, they might have a duty of care towards the client and the public to help the client formulate goals that, yes, enhance performance, but also preserve or improve wellbeing and lead to positive life experiences in objective terms. On the one hand, a coaching psychologist needs to preserve the client’s self-determination without imposing their own values, but on the other, they have their own professional values and codes of conduct. Further trouble emerges when we consider that

codes of conduct cannot legislate for all eventualities (Bhola et al., 2015). And so, it makes sense for ethics to be injected into the method of coaching so that there are checks and balances at the individual level not accounted for by ethical codes, which may lack the nuance for individual cases.

Secondly, coaching psychology is explicitly defined as an applied positive psychology. Positive psychology has been defined in two main ways, one definition focusing on the processes involved and one focusing on the outcomes sought. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000, p.5) defined positive psychology as ‘*A science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits and positive institutions...*’, which includes the development of positive individual traits (hereinafter, *virtues*) such as gratitude, honesty, or compassion as the processes most directly targeted within positive psychology (see Carr et al., 2021). Flourishing, broadly construed, appears to be the outcome sought in positive psychology, which is apparent in Gable and Haidt’s (2005, p.104) definition: ‘*the science of the conditions and processes that lead to optimal human functioning*’. The latter is especially important because it suggests that coaching psychology is not merely *deontic* – specifying things that the coach or client *cannot* do, and thereafter it is a values-based free-for-all when it comes to goals – but *aretic* (see de Ruyter & Steutel, 2013, for a discussion of these terms), focusing aspirationally on character and virtue development, with the trivialities of specific goals that get you there subordinate to this. Coaching psychologists, as good scientist-practitioners, will quickly recognise that whether a particular goal is conducive to flourishing is a testable hypothesis – grounding what we and our clients *ought* to do in what factually *is*. A client’s belief that a particular goal will lead to their flourishing must be critically examined as part of the coaching discussion, as flourishing is a matter of preference nested within and constrained by a world of facts. Autonomy is essential, but it operates within the bounda-

ries of reality – our values and choices must align with the realities of their effects on ourselves and others over time.

What counts as ‘optimal human functioning’ (i.e. ‘flourishing’) is, of course, a hotly debated question. Earlier definitions (above) appear to prioritise subjective wellbeing as an important aspect of optimal human functioning (e.g. Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, it is worth reflecting on whether subjective wellbeing could ever be considered an adequate or ethical outcome for a practicing psychologist to aspire to for their clients on its own? One could easily imagine scenarios where someone could have subjective wellbeing while their world crumbles around them in objective terms (e.g. a person with great inner peace who is a member of a cult that exploits them financially). Other accounts of optimal human functioning include a much more expansive definition, including financial security, physical health, mental health, meaning and purpose, social connectedness, and even character strengths (i.e. virtues) in and of themselves (Weziak-Bialowolska et al., 2021). The latter, more expansive definition includes elements of subjective wellbeing (e.g. meaning and purpose), but also objective wellbeing (e.g. positive facts about one’s life that can be verified from without, such as financial security). So, by some definitions, a positive psychologist and, by extension, a coaching psychologist, is required to help the client make their life measurably better, not only to make them *feel* better about their lives. Moreover, ‘better’ cannot simply mean enabling them to instrumentally pursue arbitrary goals, but goals that simultaneously contribute to the objective and subjective wellbeing of themselves *and* others. In this way, part of the coaching psychologist’s role is to channel core values, arising from their temperament, personality etc., to benefit the lives of themselves and others, in subjectively and objectively evaluable ways. That is, the coaching psychologist preserves clients’ self-determination by not

trying to alter core values, but rather, works with the client to find ways to express those core values *virtuously*.

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So, what would it look like if Aristotle was your coach? In this section, I outline some key lacunae in positive psychology that might be rectified by adopting a more comprehensive Aristotelian conception of what it means to help another to develop goals that positively reflect someone’s character and, in turn, lead to flourishing for themselves and others. While it is beyond the scope of a single article to provide a comprehensive account, there are four key concepts to outline for practitioners. The first is the doctrine of The Golden Mean (see Niemiec, 2019), the second is practical wisdom or *phronesis* (Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2024b), the third is the concept of tragic flaws or *hamartia* (Aristotle, 1951), and the fourth considers an Aristotelian conception of friendship (Kristjánsson, 2020) and how it relates to the role of the coach and their relationship to their client.

The Golden Mean

In positive psychology, the most commonly used tool for assessing character and virtues is the Values in Action (VIA) survey (see McGrath, 2019), which purports to assess 24 character strengths (e.g. prudence, honesty, etc.) using a Likert scale self-report. When scoring the VIA, more of a certain virtue is considered ‘good’. While the VIA has some predictive validity (Han, 2019), this linear conception of virtue is arguably not adequate from a practitioner perspective. Imagine, for a moment, a coach is working with a client and encourages them to develop the virtue of courage. This is of course a good thing, in general. However, there are clearly scenarios when an excess of courage can manifest as foolhardiness. For instance, a coach might be working with the client on being more courageous. They could set goals such as joining a public speaking club and detail the steps

to get there, and the goal might gradually be achieved. The client then moves on, emboldened to be brave more often and decide to strike up a conversation with a stranger of their own accord. Nine times out of 10 (so to speak), this would be an exemplar of courage, rendering the client a courageous person. On the tenth time, they might strike up a conversation with the wrong person and put themselves in danger.

The lesson here is that more of a virtue is not necessarily a good thing. We all know about virtue deficiencies: People who are low in courage are cowardly, people who are low in honesty are deceitful, people who are low in loyalty are treacherous. However, there are also virtue excesses to work on so we can respond in contextually appropriate ways. People who are too brave might be reckless, people who are too honest are blunt, people who are too loyal are obsequious sycophants. In this way, a client might be supported by having them explore and critically reflect on whether and to what extent their goals are motivated by or exemplify virtue, the golden mean between vices of deficiency and vices of excess (see Niemiec, 2019).

Now, returning to the example of cultivating courage, should courage be tempered with judgement or prudence, and which one takes precedence when *these* virtues clash? This leads us nicely to the next section on the meta-virtue of *phronesis*.

Practical Wisdom (*Phronesis*)

To help people effectively navigate difficult situations in their lives, it is not always clear which course of action is best. Our values often clash, leading to moral dilemmas that require adjudication. For example, moral dilemmas are a common occurrence in the workplace, presenting employees with challenging decisions that test their ethical principles. Consider the following scenario involving a coaching client: The client works in a company's finance department and discovers that their manager has been manipulating financial reports to make the

company's performance appear better than it actually is. This deception could mislead investors and stakeholders, creating a significant ethical conflict.

There are three broad approaches to solving this dilemma: utilitarianism (Mill, 1848), deontology (Kant, 1964) and virtue ethics (Crisp et al., 1997). From a utilitarian perspective, the best course of action would be to report the issue to higher management or a regulatory body. Utilitarianism focuses on achieving the greatest good for the greatest number. Reporting the falsified reports could prevent potential harm to investors, employees and the company's reputation. Although it might cause short-term difficulties for the company and the manager, it ensures long-term benefits and integrity for all stakeholders involved. From a deontological standpoint, the focus is on duty and adherence to ethical principles. In this case, the client would report the issue because it is their duty to uphold honesty and integrity. According to deontological ethics, they have a moral obligation to act in accordance with ethical rules, regardless of the consequences. Manipulating financial reports is inherently wrong, so it is their duty to report the wrongdoing to maintain ethical standards and transparency. Lastly, from the perspective of virtue ethics, the client might seek a private conversation with the manager to discuss the issue and encourage them to correct the financial reports. Virtue ethics emphasises the character and virtues of the individual. By addressing the issue directly with the manager, the client demonstrates courage, honesty and integrity. This approach aims to foster a virtuous environment and encourages the manager to act ethically and pragmatically without immediately resorting to external authorities, potentially maintaining professional relationships while still addressing the unethical behaviour.

Each of these approaches offers a distinct perspective on handling moral dilemmas, illustrating the complexities and varying

strategies that individuals might employ in real-life situations. However, let us suppose that the client aims to make decisions based on some consideration of virtue. Even among virtue ethicists, virtues can clash in situations like this, requiring careful adjudication. For instance, the virtues of honesty and loyalty may conflict, as being truthful about the manipulation might betray the manager's trust. This is where the concept of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, comes into play (Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2024b). *Phronesis* acts like the conductor of an orchestra of virtues (a 'meta-virtue'), ensuring each virtue is expressed in the right measure and at the right time, much like balancing the instruments to create harmonious music (Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2024a).

According to the deontologist's rule book, there is no obvious way to adjudicate between competing virtues. According to the utilitarian's ledger of pros versus cons, one could opt for one virtue over another such that they trample an individual's rights in service of The Greater Good. Practical wisdom helps us navigate these nuances, guiding us to act in ways that harmonise our virtues and lead to the best possible outcomes. In this scenario, the client needs to balance honesty with compassion and loyalty with justice. By employing *phronesis*, they can determine the most appropriate course of action, considering the full context and the potential impact on all involved. This balanced approach ensures that the client acts with integrity and promotes the well-being of both them and the broader community. But what does this look like, in practice? While recent research (McLoughlin et al., 2025) unpicks this question in great detail using multiple, nationally representative samples, I have included a brief outline below.

Working through the four components of *phronesis* (Darnell et al., 2019; Kristjánsson et al., 2023) may be a useful way to help clients navigate moral dilemmas. The first component is Moral Perception: the client

might identify which virtues are at stake and consider how certain courses of action reflect on their character. The second component is Moral Identity – which virtues are most personally salient for the client's sense of self and how do these fit together across life domains. This can be the subject of regular reflection across sessions to develop a deep understanding of one's direction in life, or perhaps a 'quick and dirty' analysis if focused on a more immediate problem. Thirdly, Moral Emotion factors in which courses of action will make the client feel good/bad about themselves, and how can they strategise about how to regulate their emotions at the right moments to make optimal choices. Finally, Moral Adjudication: how can the client source information that might be a pre-requisite to making the right decision and integrate this alongside consideration of their identity, emotions and the affordances of the situation at hand? By asking questions like these, the client is enabled to think about how to make a satisfying and effective decision in a difficult situation that may not have a 'correct' answer. This approach does not treat the clients' goals as arbitrary, as implied in some definitions of coaching outlined earlier. Instead, goals are set as a way of habituating the virtues that clients aspire towards, which in turn means to the end of helping themselves and others to flourish – an objective yardstick against which the 'goodness' of their actions can be evaluated.

Tragic Flaws (*Hamartia*)

'There remains, then, the character between these two extremes—that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty.' – Aristotle (1951, p.10)

No two people are the same. By extension, what is considered 'virtuous' cannot be the same for everyone. For this reason, a coach would encourage each client not to attempt to be someone they are not (e.g. a temperamentally disagreeable person to

become radically compassionate overnight). For instance, if a career coach is working with a client who is extremely risk-averse, then they may make an excellent accountant but not such a good firefighter. This illustrates what has become known as a ‘tragic flaw’ (*hamartia*) within Aristotle’s work. In more modern language, though, this might give permission for the coach to explore with the client, where relevant, client traits that they cannot easily change of their own volition. For instance, cognitive ability is by far the greatest predictor of job performance (Ree & Earles, 1994), but there is no brain training that appears to work (Sala et al., 2019; Sala & Gobet, 2019). Similarly, personality is stable and difficult to shift (Bleidorn et al., 2022), though gradual and effortful behavioural habituation does appear to allow some degree of change (Hudson et al., 2019). These stable individual differences are some of the most well-validated and predictive constructs within psychological science, so a coaching approach fit for the challenge of the human condition would be remiss to discount them.

Appreciating the substantial effects of individual differences on behaviour and that no two people can be made *the same* puts onus on us to appreciate diversity of abilities and interests. In this way, the ‘goodness’ of a person is measured by the degree to which they are flourishing and enabling others to flourish *relative to* their biological priors – be they personality traits, cognitive abilities, disabilities, or indeed, extraordinary biological advantages. Nonetheless, the well-established influence of these less malleable factors might be explored when articulating one’s best self within which one’s more concrete goals are nested. The coach’s role must not be to tell the client what their talents and limitations are, but to offer a exploratory assessments and follow-up conversations so that the goals clients eventually set themselves are optimally motivating, realistic, and challenging. Most of all, the psychologist must ensure the client aims to be no more and no less than the optimal version of themselves, rather than

making upward or downward comparisons with others who were neither biologically nor situationally comparable to begin with.

Aristotelian friendship

Aristotle (1985) identifies three types of friendship in his *Nicomachean Ethics*: friendships of utility, friendships of pleasure, and character friendships. Friendships of utility are based on mutual benefit, where each party gains something practical from the relationship. Friendships of pleasure revolve around the enjoyment derived from the other person’s company, often seen in relationships formed around shared hobbies or interests. In contrast, character friendships are the highest form of friendship, grounded in mutual respect and admiration for each other’s virtuous character (Kristjánsson, 2020). These friendships are enduring and foster mutual moral and personal development.

In the context of coaching psychology, the appropriate professional relationship lies somewhere between a character friendship and a utility friendship. Like a character friendship, the coach helps the client develop virtues and navigate life’s challenges, pushing back compassionately if the client appears to be heading down a harmful path. This dynamic ensures that the relationship is not merely transactional but is deeply rooted in the client’s overall wellbeing and growth, nested within wider societal concerns. The coach acts with the client’s best interests in mind, similar to how a good friend would, fostering a supportive and challenging environment for personal development. However, the coaching relationship also shares elements of a friendship of utility. The coach is compensated for their services, and there is an inherent power differential between the coach and the client. This professional aspect ensures that the coach maintains appropriate boundaries and adheres to ethical guidelines, particularly when the client’s actions could lead to public harm. The ultimate choice and

self-determination lie with the client, except in cases where intervention is necessary to prevent significant harm.

By integrating principles from both character and utility friendships, the coaching relationship achieves a balance that is professionally appropriate and ethically sound. However, coaching is about more than the dynamic between coach and client; it is about empowering clients to create conditions for their flourishing (see also McLoughlin & Kristjánsson, 2025). Flourishing is not simply a matter of personal achievement or virtue development in isolation – it is a fundamentally social endeavour. Clients thrive not just because of what they learn or how they grow but because of the relationships they build that sustain and reinforce that growth. Coaching may offer the tools for self-improvement, but the client's social world provides the scaffolding where those tools are most effectively used.

A critical part of this process is coaching clients to autonomously seek and cultivate virtue friendships – relationships rooted in mutual respect, shared values, and an appreciation for each other's character. These friendships are essential for maintaining the best of what the coaching relationship offers, ensuring that personal growth is embedded in a supportive social context long after the coaching relationship has ended. By identifying and nurturing connections with people who challenge and inspire them, clients can sustain their flourishing and continue their moral development independently. This shift from reliance on the coach to building a network of character friendships represents the culmination of effective coaching: equipping clients not only to grow but to embed that growth in a community that reinforces and amplifies it. To coach effectively is to help clients understand that their flourishing is incomplete without this broader social dimension. Relationships grounded in virtue encourage habits of generosity, honesty, and courage that are impossible to

develop in isolation. These friendships are the testing ground where virtues are honed and transformed into lived realities. They are also the safeguard against the temptations of performative goodness, reminding the client that authenticity is not about appearances but about aligning actions with values in the presence of those who hold us accountable to our best selves.

Ultimately, flourishing is not about reaching a solitary peak of achievement; it is about constructing a life where virtues are both nurtured and needed. Coaching equips clients with the tools to navigate their individual journeys, but it must also guide them towards building a network of relationships that reinforce their progress and challenge their limitations. Flourishing is a collaborative endeavour, and virtue friendships are its lifeblood. These relationships provide the continuity and depth that turn transient successes into lasting transformation. In the end, a flourishing life is not just one well-lived, but one well-connected, grounded in relationships that inspire, challenge, and sustain.

Conclusion

This article has introduced PWC, a novel and interdisciplinary approach to coaching psychology grounded in Aristotelian philosophy. By integrating key concepts such as the golden mean (*mesotês*), practical wisdom (*phronesis*), tragic flaws (*hamartia*), and character friendships (*philia*), PWC offers a holistic and philosophically robust framework for guiding clients toward personal and professional growth. Unlike traditional coaching methods that often prioritise goal attainment and subjective wellbeing, PWC emphasises the development of character and the pursuit of a flourishing life. PWC provides a deeper, ethically grounded foundation for coaching, ensuring that the wellbeing and growth of the client are central. A critical advantage of PWC is its incorporation of professional ethics directly into the method, rather than imposing them exter-

nally via ethical codes. This intrinsic ethical framework helps prevent potential harms that could arise from unwise goal setting. By fostering an environment where virtues are developed and balanced, coaching psychologists can guide clients to make decisions that are ethically sound and conducive to long-term eudemonic well-being. This article has also highlighted the practical applications of Aristotelian thought, introducing novel concepts and methodological approaches that can significantly enhance coaching practices. Through PWC, coaching psychologists can act as character friends, providing both support and critical feedback, while maintaining professional boundaries and addressing the complexities of human behaviour.

In conclusion, PWC offers a comprehensive and ethically robust coaching methodology that prioritises the holistic development of clients. By embedding ethical

considerations into the coaching process and leveraging Aristotelian principles, PWC not only helps clients achieve their goals but also ensures their actions contribute to their overall flourishing and the wellbeing of themselves and others. This approach represents a significant advancement in coaching psychology, offering coaching psychologists effective tools and strategies for fostering meaningful and sustainable personal growth.

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