

COACHING ANGER: A DEADLY SIN IN A LIVELY PROFESSION

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According to Christian tradition, anger comprises one of the “seven deadly sins”. In Eastern religious thought anger is held to be poisonous and addictive. These views point to the problematic nature of anger. Some hold, however, that anger can have an appropriate expression and a positive function. Since anger is often vented in sport, it is important to assess the significance of anger in this area of life. Coaches, in particular, frequently display anger. Given this fact, in this paper I focus on the nature of anger and its role in the coaching profession. Is there something distinctive about the role of the coach such that coaches should be granted special leeway in the expression of anger? “Coaching anger” refers not merely to the manifestation of coaches’ anger, but also to practical steps towards effective and appropriate dealing with this complex emotion.

Keywords: Coaching, seven deadly sins, anger, religion, ethics.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is offered in the spirit of philosophical counseling. I present “therapeutic arguments” (Nussbaum, 1994) in an attempt to address the issue of anger in the coaching profession. More broadly, I wish for coaches to live flourishing lives.

Allow me to begin with a personal anecdote. A few years ago I conducted a brief, one-time experiment in a philosophy of sport class that I was teaching. On that day, after entering the classroom, I proceeded to berate my students about their lack of effort. I even kicked a piece of classroom furniture in theatrical disgust. Some students appeared amused, but others were clearly taken aback. After continuing in this fashion for a brief period, I stopped and smiled. This marked the end of the experiment. I then compared my simulated harangue with the demeanor of coaches whose similar outbursts are par for the course. Was there some difference between the role of a coach and my role as a professor that would justify a coach’s angry outbursts, but make mine unacceptable? Coaches claim to be teachers and I also am a teacher. Should I not show intensity about my students’ efforts with respect to their education equal to that displayed by coaches of various sports?

Lest you conclude that my histrionics during my experiment were out of proportion to what goes on in the world of coaching, I should divulge that I live in the state of Indiana, USA, and for years I had ample opportunity to observe the highly successful, but volatile basketball coach, Bob Knight. During his twenty-nine years as men’s basketball coach at Indiana University, Knight’s teams garnered numerous Big Ten Confer-

ence championships and three national collegiate titles. Knight also coached the U. S. men’s national team to an Olympic gold medal in 1984. But Knight’s career at Indiana University was also marked by angry outbursts, including one widely-publicized incident in 1985 in which he threw a chair across the basketball court to protest the officiating of a game against rival Purdue University. After a series of further on and off the court incidents over the years, Knight was placed under a zero tolerance policy in the spring of the year 2000 by then President of Indiana University, Myles Brand. On September 10, 2000 Knight was fired after an incident that occurred off the basketball court (The Indianapolis Star). He now coaches at Texas Tech University.

Among the ranks of coaches, Bob Knight is particularly well known for his combustible personality, but he is by no means alone when it comes to exhibiting explosive anger. Displays of anger by coaches may make for great theater, but they often illustrate *prima facie* problematic behavior on the part of coaches. Some of these actions place others’ well being in jeopardy, while others exhibit loss of self-control, or indicate the presence of malice.

If elite coaches comport themselves in this manner, what behavior can we expect from coaches at lower levels who in many ways emulate coaches who have attained iconic status? While establishing direct causal links may prove difficult, we find equally problematic behavior among coaches at lower levels. Even angry and often punitive behavior of lesser intensity and consequence on the part of coaches raises acute questions, because this behavior is pervasive within the coaching profession and thus suggests that it may exist within

a culture of tolerance of such behavior. Coaches rant at game officials over perceived botched calls, and yell at players who make mistakes, underachieve, or seem to give less than full effort. Is this behavior by coaches acceptable? In terms of expressing anger, does a different set of “display rules” (Ekman, 2003) exist for coaches than for individuals in other walks of life? If so, are these rules justified? As I note in the title of this paper, coaching is a “lively” or passionate profession. Coaches are expected to instruct, inspire, motivate, and advocate. But why does anger in particular play such a seemingly prominent role in coaching? Is this prominence justifiable in light of the application of “role-differentiated ethics for the occupation of coaching” (Jones, 2005)? Are coaches called to adhere to a “bracketed morality” (Shields & Bredemeier, 1995) distinct from the ethics of everyday life? Might it be the case that an excessively high threshold of acceptance of anger in coaches contributes to all too frequent explosive displays of anger? Where can we and coaches look for guidance?

Considered from a broader historical and cross-cultural perspective, these questions take on particular urgency. As shown by Thurman (2005), there are strains within both Western and Asian philosophical and religious traditions which attribute to anger a “deadly” quality. In some of these strains elimination of anger is the recommended course of action. Elsewhere, such as in Aristotle (1980), we also find the view that properly modulated anger can, on occasion, be an appropriate response to a situation. How should we assess these different views and what applicability might they have to coaching? Can they help us establish proper norms for coaching anger?

Part 1 of this paper looks at the debate over the proper assessment of anger. In part 2, I examine the relevance of this debate for the profession of coaching.

1. Is anger “deadly”?

Solomon Schimmel (1997) notes that the process of codifying the list of seven deadly sins with which we are most familiar today took place over the course of centuries. The compiling of lists of sins and vices was a common practice in the ancient world. Schimmel (1997) notes, in particular, the practice of singling out certain major sins as chief ones by ascetic and monastic communities in Egypt during the first century of the common era. Evagrius, a fourth century Christian monastic, identified eight major sins, including anger. John Cassian, a student of Evagrius, explained how each of the major sins generates other sins. In the sixth cen-

tury, Gregory the Great further modified the list, and reduced it to seven. In popular accounts the list today typically includes pride, envy, greed, sloth, gluttony, lust and anger. Schimmel notes that the components of this list are sometimes referred to as vices rather than sins, in order to distinguish between bad character traits and the specific acts (sins) that may result from them.

Schimmel (1997) points out that the notion of seven deadly sins is actually a misnomer. The Roman Catholic tradition distinguishes between mortal sins, on the one hand, and venial sins, which are less serious, on the other. Mortal sins are sins against God or humans that arise from malice, while venial sins are committed out of negligence or addiction. The seven so-called “deadly” sins may be either mortal or venial sins depending on the particular expression of them. Thus, Schimmel argues that it is more accurate to speak, as the Catholic tradition also does, in terms of the seven capital, cardinal, or chief sins. These terms delineate particularly dangerous sins.

Why have the entries on the list of capital sins been thought to be so dangerous? Schimmel (1997) notes that, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, a capital sin is not just problematic in its own right, but in addition could lead one to commit sins related to the specific vice, or enable one to commit other sins. Schimmel’s analysis of anger matches this description and also reveals a kind of unity of the seven deadly or capital sins. Schimmel writes: “Of the seven deadly sins, anger is the most pervasive, injurious to self and others, and most responsible for unhappiness and psychopathological behavior. It is also inextricably linked to the other cardinal sins, particularly pride and envy, as well as to hatred, and it is regularly aroused by frustrated greed and lust.”

The notion that anger can have something like a deadly quality is also reflected in Asian thought. Buddhism scholar Robert Thurman (2005) points out that Buddhism construes anger – or, to use his translation, “hate-anger” (*dvesha*) – as “an addiction (*klesha*) or a poison (*visha*)”. While in the West, anger has been thought to put one’s soul in jeopardy, in Buddhism the focus is on wrongful acts and eventual rebirth to which anger contributes. Thurman notes that in Buddhist thought anger is one of the three poisons that perpetuate a life of suffering or *samsara*¹.

In the contemporary world we also find a particular concern about anger that is not linked to the metaphysical commitments of religious systems. As noted already, Schimmel (1997) links anger to other vices. But in order to give a fuller account of the concern about anger, it is

¹ I have noted the link between anger and rebirth in Buddhist thought. One of the journal’s anonymous reviewers of this article further suggests that anger is strongly connected to “experiencing the world of the living human being in a suffering way”. This claim could be read in more than one way. It might be argued that the experience of anger is itself a form of suffering, and/or that one’s anger may result in others suffering.

useful to consider anger within the context of a general account of the emotions. Paul Ekman (2003), a contemporary expert on the facial expression of emotions, states: "Emotions change how we see the world and how we interpret the actions of others. We do not seek to challenge why we are feeling a particular emotion; instead we seek to confirm it. We evaluate what is happening in a way that is consistent with the emotion we are feeling, thus justifying and maintaining the emotion."

Ekman (2003) claims that the evolutionary history of our species, coupled with the particular histories of individuals, leaves individuals sensitive to "both universal and individual – specific emotion triggers". Both the sensitivities with which evolution equips us as well as those that we learn are subject to a process of "automatic appraising mechanisms" (Ekman). Ekman writes: "To use a computer metaphor, the automatic appraising mechanisms are searching our environment for anything that resembles what is stored in our emotion data base, which is written in part by our biology, through natural selection, and in part by our individual experience."

This statement suggests that there is an involuntary component in the triggering of an experience of anger. While this involuntary feature has some survival value in certain contexts, it is not unproblematic. Because our emotions are based on sometimes quite limited information, they can go awry. Martha Nussbaum's "neo-stoic", cognitive approach to emotions, helps explain this. On Nussbaum's (2001) view, emotions are evaluative judgments. Furthermore, these judgments may be mistaken. We may, for example, misjudge others' intentions.

In addition, according to Ekman (2003), when one experiences an emotion there is a "refractory period" during which the particular emotion being experienced is on something like automatic pilot. During this time period, which can last from a few seconds up to hours, an individual does not assimilate information that does not reinforce the particular emotion that he or she is experiencing. These considerations take on particular relevance with respect to anger, which Ekman considers the most dangerous of the emotions in the human repertoire, since it aims at hurting the object of anger. Ekman writes: "Anger controls, anger punishes, and anger retaliates." Even so, anger would be a less serious issue than it is were there fewer pathways to anger. But Ekman claims that in addition to automatic appraising, there are many other avenues to emotional experiences. In particular, Ekman notes "reflective appraising", memory, imagination, talking about the past, empathy, directives from others regarding what to be emotional about, the perception that others or that we have violated norms, and even our own facial expressions.

But does anger have only negative features? In spite of the view, whether in its religious or secular versions, that anger has a potentially deadly character, considera-

tions such as evolutionary history, the reputedly valuable role of catharsis, and the importance of standing up for just causes, might lead one to conclude that anger is natural and potentially even good. Anger focuses our attention, mobilizes us for action, helps us overcome fear, and may even be expressed as righteous indignation. Aristotle (1980) holds that not to experience anger when the circumstances call for it is reproachable. He writes: "The man who is angry at the right things and with the right people, and, further, as he ought, when he ought, and as long as he ought, is praised... For those who are not angry at the things they should be angry at are thought to be fools, and so are those who are not angry in the right way, at the right time, or with the right persons; for such a man is thought not to feel things or not to be pained by them, and, since he does not get angry, he is thought unlikely to defend himself; and to endure being insulted and put up with insult to one's friends is slavish."

But how does one discern the right way, the right time, or the right persons? One might hold that while individuals should guard against directing anger at other people, it is appropriate to be angry about unjust deeds. Ekman (2003) goes further, however, in claiming that at times one must direct anger at another person, such as when one confronts the classic bully or a person bent on cruelty. Milhaven (1989) argues that even vindictive anger has a good element in it.

This view that anger can have appropriate expressions overlaps with the stance that Buddhism scholar Robert Thurman (2005) refers to as "resigning to anger". This is giving in to anger. In contrast, Thurman points to strands within both eastern and western traditions in which the goal is the elimination of anger. He refers to this position as "resigning from anger". Drawing on Tibetan Buddhism, Thurman adopts a middle stance whereby one can tap into an illuminating energy without "giving way to anger". This energy, previously used by anger for destructive ends, can be tapped for creative purposes. Thurman suggests that some individuals might reach deep levels of Buddhist enlightenment, such that they might even be willing to sacrifice their lives before allowing themselves to be swept away by anger. He suggests however, that such people may require a mechanism for foregoing their anger, such as the compensatory belief that one's "subtle energy self" continues after one's death.

Whether or not it is possible for one to eliminate anger from one's life, from the standpoint of psychological realism it is likely to be a pathway for the few. Ekman (2003) highlights another approach, which has similarities to the Buddhist notion of mindfulness. This approach highlights attentiveness, so that one is aware of one's emotional states and can act on them out of this awareness. As already noted, Ekman contends that

the emotion of anger and actions motivated by it are at times appropriate. But attentiveness will allow us to be aware of our emotion triggers. We can pay special attention to those triggers which we find problematic, and apply a variety of techniques to help keep our emotions in check.

I have surveyed a variety of assessments of anger. Of what relevance might they be to coaching?

2. Coaching anger

Many coaches are passionate about their profession. Indeed, this is a trait that players and fans alike often find attractive about them. It is widely held that among the roles that the coach assumes is that of motivator, and coaches endear themselves to others by caring deeply. On occasion, what is taken for anger in coaches may perhaps be more accurately characterized as irascibility or even irritability. But no doubt much of what looks like angry behavior in coaches is such. Is this justifiable? Do coaches, by virtue of their profession, have particular license in this regard? Given the expectations and pressures that many coaches face, it is unrealistic to assume that they will not experience anger. But coaches can be mindful of what triggers their own experiences of anger, assess whether the anger that they experience on these occasions is rational, helpful, and morally justified, and consider appropriate steps.

Some of these anger triggers for coaches are widely shared and are well-known. They include perceived mistakes of officials, questions about competence and fairness, perceived unduly rough play or unfair play of opponents, and poor play or perceived lack of effort on the part of athletes. Insofar as one reacts angrily to a perceived injustice on the playing fields, one could plausibly view this as an expression of righteous indignation. But matters are complicated by the fact that often perceived cases of injustice are not clear-cut. Furthermore, where individuals simply make mistakes that do not arise from intent, negligence, or irresponsibility, it is not clear that anger is a rational or an appropriate response.

One might of course suggest that there is nothing in sport worth getting angry about. Forty plus years ago, James Keating (1964) suggested that sport (as opposed to athletics) should be a realm in which we accommodate one another. He held that where sport was concerned, the goal should be to make it a joyful experience for all concerned. One should not stand on one's rights. As Simon (2004) points out, this view is problematic. First, one might question whether we should distinguish between sport and athletics in this way. Second, even if we do draw this distinction, we still need to determine whether a given activity should be construed as sport or as athletics. But there is yet a further consideration.

The coach, in particular, is ideally concerned not just about his or her own rights or well-being, but especially about those which pertain to the athletes under his or her charge.

We should not expect coaches to be moral virtuosi. Furthermore, given the controversial status of the value and appropriateness of anger in general, to recommend the elimination of anger for coaches would appear as question begging. I would, however, like to offer four recommendations regarding coaching and anger.

First, given their influential roles, it is incumbent on coaches to develop self-awareness. What truly motivates coaches to coach? Why is coaching important to them? What are the triggers of coaches' anger as they pursue a vocation about which they care deeply? The self-awareness for which I am calling will ultimately require a thorough and an honest assessment by coaches of their value systems and their emotional vulnerabilities. As the Stoic philosopher Seneca (quoted in Schimmel, 1997) put it: "We are not all wounded at the same spot; therefore you ought to know what your weak spot is in order that you may especially protect it."

The psychologist Marshall Rosenberg (2005), whose international peace work is devoted to the exploration of nonviolent communication, sees the root of anger as "unmet needs" (p. 10). What unmet needs do coaches experience, and how might they best get these needs met while respecting others? It is unrealistic to think that coaches can give focused and sustained attention to these matters in the heat of competition. Therefore, if they are to address these issues in an adequate fashion, coaches will have to spend time off the playing fields in introspection. This will cut into their time for game preparation as viewed in more conventional terms. Therefore, coaches will need the support of others who acknowledge the importance of this process of self-assessment.

If coaches are scrupulously honest with themselves, what they discover in their self-assessment may be unsettling. As noted earlier, Schimmel (1997) claims that anger may be linked to vices such as envy, greed, and lust. John Hoberman (1997) suggests that race has also played a role in the anger of coaches. He writes: "It is no longer possible for an NBA coach to play the raging white autocrat in the style of racist football coaches of the Old South, and it has become increasingly difficult in college basketball as well... This loss of stature has at times compelled white sports writers to find sympathetic images for beleaguered coaches who can no longer be presented as hard-wired authoritarians still in control of their blacks."

Second, when coaches become more aware of the specific triggers for their anger, they can consider whether these triggers, which may be tied to "automatic appraising mechanisms" (Ekman, 2003), need to be ad-

dressed and even counteracted. If a coach has developed a habitual way of responding to what are perceived as similar situations, he or she is likely to miss the relevant nuances of individual situations. But self-awareness can be a first step towards change. As Robert C. Roberts (2003) writes: "Self-awareness has large implications, investing us with powers of self-assessment and self-management, responsibility, potential for change, and courses of action, and these powers are themselves attributes of the selves that possess them."

Third, while we may debate the value of anger, I believe that we can speak with more assurance about the appropriate display of anger. Coaches can become more aware of their own displays of anger, and of the examples they are setting for others, including other coaches. Coaches and governing bodies of sports need to discuss further both the explicit and implicit display rules which ought to govern coaches' emotions, and work to bring them more in line with implied or stated rules that govern other professions. Attention has already been given to excessive celebration on the part of participants in sports, resulting in specific guidelines for awarding penalties. The topic of anger in coaches is no less important, and it should also receive attention. Some coaches are already sensitive to these matters, and thus will not "show up" a game official on the playing field, or embarrass a player in front of his or her peers and other onlookers.

My view has some affinities with that of Donald G. Jones (2005), who argues that a "weak notion of role differentiated ethics for the occupation of coaching is plausible". This view allows for consideration of the special circumstances that surround the role of the coach. At the same time, this position does not hold that the ethical requirements for coaching are radically different from those attached to other roles. Even so, Jones's (2005) version of role differentiated ethics for coaches may yet be too robust, granting perhaps too much leeway for coaches' behavior. In any case, the question of how robust the notion of role differentiated ethics for coaches should be is a topic worthy of debate.

Finally, it would be good for coaches to cultivate compassion, both for others, and for themselves. It has been said that in order to deal effectively with anger, one must be able to forgive humanity. To do so implies that coaches must also cultivate self-forgiveness, and in turn self-acceptance. Ultimately, this too calls for heightened mindfulness and self-awareness. But if my own intuition is correct, this may be a good place to start.

CONCLUSION

My wish is for coaches to lead flourishing lives. To that end I have offered these reflections in the mode

of philosophical counseling. No doubt coaches' anger can have a disruptive and even deadly quality. Even so, this anger is revelatory in nature. In connection with coaches' anger, I have underscored the importance of introspection, whereby coaches may become more aware of their own life stories and needs, and in turn, of those anger triggers to which they are susceptible. The self-awareness born of introspection may lead coaches to make better choices about when and how to express their anger. Good coaches are known for an ability to focus and for attentiveness to detail as they face the challenges inherent in carrying out their coaching duties. Those same qualities can be brought to bear in coaching their own anger.

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**TRÉNINK HNĚVU:
SMRTELNÝ HŘÍCH
V TEMPERAMENTNÍ PROFESI**
(Souhrn anglického textu)

Podle křesťanské tradice je hněv jedním ze „sedmi smrtelných hříchů“. Ve východním náboženském myšlení je hněv považován za jedovatý a návykový. Tyto pohledy poukazují na problémovou povahu hněvu. Jiní se však domnívají, že hněv může nabývat vhodného výrazu a pozitivní funkce. Vzhledem k tomu, že hněv se ve sportu projevuje často, je důležité vyhodnotit význam hněvu také v této oblasti lidského života. Zvláště často projevují hněv trenéři. S ohledem na tuto skutečnost se v tomto příspěvku zaměřuji na povahu hněvu a jeho roli v profesi trenéra. Je na roli, kterou trenér zastává, něco, co by trenérům poskytovalo zvláštní svobodu ve vyjadřování hněvu? „Trénink hněvu“ se nezabývá výhradně projevy hněvu trenérů, ale také praktickými kroky vedoucími k účinnému a přiměřenému ovládnutí této složité emoce.

Klíčová slova: trénink, sedm smrtelných hříchů, hněv, náboženství, etika.

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