

Back to basics III: On inquiry, the groundwork of coaching and consulting

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Purpose: *The purpose of this study is to go to the heart of the consulting and coaching intervention and to explore what is its core active ingredient. In earlier articles (De Haan, 2011 & 2012) I introduced two basic ingredients in terms of their historical understanding: transference and reflective-self function. This article hopes to demonstrate how underpinning these important dynamic ingredients of executive coaching there is a still more fundamental faculty, that of basic inquiry.*

Design/Methodology: *This contribution offers a historical account of our interest in pure inquiry, demonstrating how personal inquiry lies at the root of two traditions that are more than two millennia old, one from the East and one from the West, Buddhism and Scepticism. The capacity of pure inquiry is further elucidated by bringing to bear the modern practices of action research and mindful inquiry, and with the help of four examples from executive coaching practice.*

Results: *Executive coaches are reminded of a basic function that they are offering before even opening their mouth, before they start to mentalise or use their reflective-self function, before their understanding of transference and before intervening in any of the many forms of guidance that are well-documented. This basic function is akin to listening and also quite delicate, being at some peril of diminishing in the face of goal-setting, results-orientation or directive interventions.*

Conclusions: *Personal inquiry in and of itself is a helpful way into mindfulness, insight and empathetic understanding. Coaches would do well to notice how they inquire with their clients and within themselves.*

Keywords: *Personal inquiry; action research; mindfulness; listening skills; coaching outcome; consulting; history of scepticism and buddhism.*

Of none of our future statements do we positively affirm that the fact is exactly as we state it, but we simply record each fact, like a chronicler, as it appears to us at the moment. (S.E. I.4)¹

THIS CONTRIBUTION is homage to the simple practice of ‘just’ sitting at the feet of your own experience. Have you ever done nothing more, and nothing less, than staying attentively with your practice as it unfolds, staying in touch with your experiences as they are? So you know how difficult, nigh impossible that is? You will have experienced how easy it is to rush in and label, categorise or judge, how tempting it is to

prejudge or evaluate these experiences, even to act on them in a variety of ways. You will have experienced how easy it is to get carried away by experience, rather than taking the time to just observe and be present, or in other words, without taking the time ‘to just experience’. In other words, you will have set yourself a challenging task, namely to ‘just’ experience your experiences.

¹ Sextus Empiricus writes this at the beginning of his text on scepticism: *Outline of Pyrrhonism*, a text that I will return to several times in this article, with direct quotes from the Loeb Classics translation (in italics). I will refer to it briefly by S.E. – e.g. this citation is at S.E. I.4, *Outline of Pyrrhonism* Book One Section Four. Of Sextus Empiricus very little is known and he is usually described as a Greek physician and philosopher living in Alexandria, Athens and Rome around the year 200 AD. He wrote in Greek and drew on 500 years’ of sceptical philosophy, a tradition that started with Pyrrho from Elis who travelled with Alexander the Great on his campaigns in the East.

About the schools, their irreconcilable differences and the limits of knowing

The domain of practice of this article is executive coaching, the branch of organisation-development consulting that specialises in providing one-to-one helping conversations for leaders and professionals. 'Just' sitting at the feet of experience matches the simplest offer that executive coaches may make to their clients. In my view it is a rather minimalist thing to do in coaching: 'just' sitting with experience. Schools abound with competing ideas about what else coaches and clients should be doing together:

- *Solution focused coaching* tells us to avoid 'problem traps', look on the bright side, at what works, when problems are not there, and imagine even brighter futures with, for example, the 'miracle question': 'how might you know that you have found what you are seeking?' (Greene & Grant, 2003).
- *Performance coaching* tells us to ask for goals first and foremost, then to establish the tension between those future goals and present reality, then to move on to ways in which we can reduce that gap, and finally to remind ourselves of what exactly we are going to do to reach the goals (Whitmore, 1992).
- *Rational-emotive coaching* tells us to dig in to our 'false' cognitions, self-beliefs, and limiting assumptions, challenge them and adopt a stoic stance in the face of adversity, keeping our emotions as much as we can under our control (Sherin & Caiger, 2004).
- *Person-centred coaching* tells us to offer an exuberance of warmth, respect and understanding from within, to any issues and situations that our clients may offer. In fact, in this conception of coaching we need to be as unconditional and pure in our love and understanding as a loving parent. (Joseph, 2006)

- *Relational coaching* tells us to investigate and reinforce the productivity of the relationship from the client's perspective, and explicitly to explore with the client the present coaching relationship (De Haan, 2008a).

This is only a very short selection of models and methodologies, with the first three taken from various cognitive-behavioural schools, the next one from a humanistic orientation and the final one broadly integrative with origins in psycho-analysis.

There is not a lot of evidence to back up these various claims about what would be helpful to do in coaching (see the recent overview of what we know about coaching outcomes in De Haan & Duckworth, 2013). Moreover, what evidence there is can be contested as there have been only so few quantitative research studies in the field. And even if one trusts the evidence from say trials with control groups then there are still good reasons to be sceptical about how much of that can be translated back to practice. Outcome-research evidence is based on simple digits collected after or at unique points in a long and rich coaching journey, so it cannot say anything about what happens within that journey.

To make matters even worse, what evidence we do have points at equivalence of all these various models and schools. 'Everybody has won, and all must have prizes'² – or put slightly ironically: clients and coaches are going to get extremely busy in their coaching room trying to do all these many things that are now shown to be effective, many of which are arguably incompatible.

There is a long history in executive coaching, and more generally, in helping conversations, of presenting specific ideas, schools, techniques and interventions as somehow 'effective' or 'evidence based'. At the same time many of us remain convinced that it is far too early for any

² The present state of affairs in helping conversations was already intuited by Rosenzweig (1936) and to sum it up he coined this phrase from the 'Dodo-bird verdict' in *Alice in Wonderland* (Chapter 3).

single approach or technique to claim a unique evidence base.

The schools frequently admit only such facts as can be explained by their own theories, and dismiss facts which conflict therewith though possessing equal probability. (S.E. I.183)

Due to this situation which is in my view very likely to continue, it is ultimately very hard to say about any piece of coaching that it is 'good' coaching (or 'helpful', 'effective', 'adroit', etc.), even for experts. In order to attest that any coaching is good, one needs a criterion or criteria. For any criteria one wishes to apply one needs a demonstration that the criterion is actually related to what is good in coaching, that is, to outcome, or effectiveness. For such a demonstration one needs to know in general terms what makes up a good intervention or a good assignment, and why. As professional coaches I believe we should be honest and remind ourselves regularly that we remain clueless as to all of the above.

If, then, one cannot hope to pass judgement on the aforementioned impressions either with or without proof, the conclusion we are driven to is suspension; for while we can, no doubt, state the nature which each object appears to possess as viewed in a certain position or at a certain distance or in a certain place, what its real nature is, we are unable to declare. (S.E. I.123)

Despite the lack of certainty about what works, we keep finding that coaching is generally considered helpful and shown to be effective and also that panels of experts and lay people (such as in our own Ashridge Coach Accreditation Process) tend to agree remarkably well on those matters. Nevertheless, the reasons for agreement are not known and have not been demonstrated. Moreover panels of accreditors do come across occasional nasty surprises of profound disagreement in co-assessing live sessions of coaching.

In my view this is a state of affairs that calls for a 'minimalist' conception of coaching, where we 'just' sit in doubt about what 'helpful' means, and try to remain present with our experience, the experience both within the 'material' of coaching and also as emerging in the here-and-now interaction in the room.

About the real freedom and understanding one can acquire by not knowing

After reading so many textbooks with good ideas about what to do in the coaching room, it can really free us up to forget about all that and suspend our judgements. As in every profession it appears to me very wholesome to try to relieve ourselves in this way of all dogmatism. Freed up from preconceived notions and dogmatic tenets we become more aware of how little we can really know about our contribution and we become as sensitive as we can be to what our experiences might be telling us in this very moment as we do our work.

It was Socrates who said, in defence of his philosophical way of life,³ that the 'unreflected (or unexamined) life is not worth living'. I believe similarly that the 'unreflected coach' is not worth hiring. And to make it even more Socratic: the reflected coach is not worth hiring either. That would still make the person who hires into a passive 'customer' of a reflective coach. What is on the other hand worth doing in my opinion is engaging reflectively and humbly... together with your reflective and humble coach.

I would like to describe this practice of 'sitting at the feet of one's own experience' in a few more words. The practice has many forerunners and many followers, in a great variety of traditions of thought. I will here first follow the Sceptical tradition, which is one of the oldest and seems closest to our present-day ideas about reflective inquiry,

³ As romanticised by Plato in the Apology, 38a. Stephen Grosz' recent psychoanalytical bestselling title *The examined life* is a reference to the same passage.

and I will then make a link with a great Eastern tradition as well, that of Buddhist mindfulness.

In fact, in ancient Greek the translation of 'inquiry' would be the word 'sceptsis' which is usually translated into English more fully as 'suspension of judgement in investigation' (S.E. I.30). Sceptsis can also be translated with 'examination' and with 'doubt'.

Inquiry means, first and foremost, taking leave of what opinions and views we may have and holding lightly all 'knowledge' we may think we possess. For a genuine inquiry we need to actively open up space. This opening up of space the sceptics call 'deferring judgement':

Accordingly, the sceptic, seeing so great a diversity of practices, suspends judgement as to the natural existence of anything good or bad or (in general) fit or unfit to be done, therein abstaining from the rashness of dogmatism; and he follows undogmatically the ordinary rules of life, and because of this he remains impassive in respect of matters of opinion... (S.E. III.235)

To open up space for inquiry, we may even need to depart from certain convictions that are important to us, about how one 'ought' to live, how one 'should' coach, or what reflections are 'better' than others. Much more room for inquiry will be opened up if we can park our opinions on the good and the bad, the effective and ineffective, and the ethical and unethical, even if only temporarily.

For the man that opines that anything is by nature good or bad is for ever being disquieted: when he is without the things which he deems good he believes himself to be tormented by things naturally bad and he pursues after the things which are, as he thinks, good; which when he has obtained he keeps falling into still more perturbations because of his irrational and immoderate elation, and in his dread of a change of fortune he uses every endeavour to avoid losing the things which he deems good. On the other hand, the man who determines nothing as to what is naturally good or bad neither shuns nor pursues anything eagerly; and, in consequence, he is unperturbed. (S.E. I.27)

We also need to suspend or defer our judgements regarding inquiry itself and what it is yielding. This is why the findings of inquiry are quite often liberating and innovative. They are also impossible to generalise or turn into 'knowledge' (generalisable, replicable facts or essential truths), precisely because inquiry is such a highly personal, unique and liberating expedition.

No practice can be perceived in its purity or essence. There is the relationship with the perceiver and the present state of the perceiver that impacts on the perception, and there is also the context and the other practices in view which impact on the perception. (S.E. I.135)

Finally, complex definitions and jargon are best avoided, as they have a tendency to close down the space for reflection with elaborate and esoteric language.

Thus for instance, to take a silly example, suppose that one wished to ask someone whether he had met a man riding a horse and leading a dog and put the question in this form – 'O rational mortal animal, receptive of intelligence and science, have you met with an animal capable of laughter, with broad nails and receptive of political science, with his posterior hemispheres seated on a mortal animal capable of neighing, and leading a four-footed animal capable of barking?' – how would one be otherwise than ridiculous, in thus reducing the man to speechlessness concerning so familiar an object, because of one's definitions? (S.E. I.211)

The sceptics had a number of 'invocations' to help them to stay rigorously with the practice of undogmatically attending to experience, such as (see S.E. I.107 onwards):

1. 'Not more': do not attend to one aspect more than to another. Or: for what reason would this view or this perspective be more important than that one?
2. 'Non-assertion': assertively non-assert that one thing is like this or like that, to remind oneself that ultimately one is not able to affirm or deny any assertion or evidence, as a counter-example may yet emerge.

3. 'Perhaps, possibly, maybe': an emphasis on qualifying terms that make sure we are reminded that we don't have ultimate knowledge or final truths.
4. 'I suspend judgement': reinforcing the basic premise which creates space to observe and to reflect, in a fresh way.
5. 'I determine nothing': I am in a state of mind where I come to no conclusions and where I do not, nor would I want to, determine anything.

A state of mind of suspending judgement about experience means that you do not deny any assertion about it whilst you also do not affirm it, you don't embrace the experience nor do you flee it, you don't value the experience nor do you devalue it – in short you aim to be perfectly still and tranquil with regard to your present experience, neither moving the experience along nor being moved by it, yet infinitely attentive to it. Freud (1912) famously spoke about 'evenly hovering attention' to make the same point, and Bion (1970) about consulting 'without memory or desire'.

In the modern forms of inquiry, which build on Lewin's (1946) coining of the term Action Research, there is recognition that personal inquiry can be undertaken at many levels within a client or organisational relationship. Executive coaches can inquire into their clients' and sponsors' experiences; the experiences of their clients' organisational counterparts such as colleagues, line managers and customers; and their own experiences with their clients. They can make use of individual reflection, co-created reflection (in dialogue) and they can gather fruits from outside reflection by third parties; in other words they can engage in first-person, second-person and third-person inquiry (Reason & Torbert, 2001). Finally, they can practice individual or first-person reflection entirely within themselves or reflection with others (such as their clients) into how they are experienced by those; in other words, they can make use of both the

'inner arc' and the 'outer arc' of personal inquiry (Marshall, 2001).

Of all the many traditions of philosophical scepticism that have practiced these and similar paths to inquiry-based understanding (Buddhism, Carvaka, Jainism, Al-Ghazali, Montaigne, etc.), I would like to draw particular attention to *mindfulness* even if only for its popularity in the 21st century. Mindfulness signifies inquiry into the present moment, as practiced in Buddhism. Both inquiry traditions, Buddhist meditation and Pyrrhonic scepticism, are over two millennia old: one a great tradition from the West and one from the East, and they come together in their ability to create space and tranquility for the inquirer (ataraxia or peace-of-mind cum serenity in scepticism; *bodhi* or awakening cum enlightenment in Buddhism).

Amongst the earliest suttas of Buddhist scripture there are instructions to mindfulness practice and they describe the liberation felt by just attending, or just noticing, in a very similar way to Sextus Empiricus. Here is an example:

Thus he lives contemplating feeling in feelings internally, or he lives contemplating feeling in feelings externally, or he lives contemplating feeling in feelings internally and externally. He lives contemplating origination-things in feelings, or he lives contemplating dissolution-things in feelings, or he lives contemplating origination-and-dissolution-things in feelings. Or his mindfulness is established with the thought: 'Feeling exists,' to the extent necessary just for noticing and remembrance and he lives independent and clings to naught in the world. Thus, indeed, O bhikkhu, a bhikkhu⁴ lives contemplating feeling in feelings. (Sathipattana Sutta, 29 BC)

Whilst the sceptical tradition helps us to move away from dogmatic views and to defer our judgements, so that we can begin to attend to experience itself, the Buddhist tradition goes deeper and writes in more detail about how it is to attend fully and

⁴ A 'bhikkhu' is a practitioner or a monk; literally a 'beggar'.

inquire into experience in the present moment, as it unfolds. More links between Buddhist traditions and the inquiry process can be found in Bentz and Shapiro (1998).

Specific help with undertaking an inquiry: Beyond right and wrong

The first problem for psychologists, coaches and consultants, who want to ‘just’ sit with experience, or undertake a ‘pure’ or ‘sceptical’ inquiry, is that they will want to do it well. As with anything they would undertake they will want to make a good job of it. Right there, at the very start, they begin interfering with their own inquiry, as they start asking themselves questions about what a good inquiry might be, which methods to use, and how to make the best use of time, models, guidance and other resources. The idea of doing an inquiry well is a fallacy, and sets up the polarities of good and evil, and the dogma’s of established doctrine, that one wants to move away from. It is possible to sit at the feet of your experience rigorously, or intensely, but it is hard to do it ‘rightly’, or ‘correctly’. Thus we can judge an inquiry afterwards, or at least the fruits of inquiry, if it is written up, in terms of what we infer about the quality of inquiry retrospectively, and in terms of other aspects as well... but if we judge an inquiry as it happens we seriously obstruct it. By judging it we would take it away from its central purpose.

***Case Example:** I was asked by a reviewer of this journal if I could provide more case examples for this article, to show coaching psychologists how they might get into inquiry work and to clarify the relevance of these ideas to their practice. I appreciated this question and how such examples might enliven the article. Yet I had no ready-made cases to hand and I was away from my client work. So I decided to make the need for more examples a topic for my inquiry. As a result, instead of creating a case vignette, instead of putting any words to paper, I started to go about my business with this question in mind. Something helpful would surely come up, as long as I truly inquired into my question. At first I thought about several*

recent client conversations. Then I had memories of inquiry-process students and how helpless they sometimes found themselves at the beginning of their project, when they were trying to design or embark on their inquiry. I remembered how they made me feel out of my own depth as well when the only thing I could say to them was, ‘trust the process’ or ‘just stay with your question’. I tried to do precisely that myself this time. On the third day came a breakthrough and I realised that I could use this very example: my efforts to think up relevant case examples, as an appropriate, lively and relevant example. And so I decided to write up my short reflective journey around case examples.

The second problem is the choice of an inquiry question. A question limits space rather than opening up space. To choose a focus constrains the essential freedom of inquiry, and thus goes against the spirit of inquiry, even if ever so slightly. Strictly, it is not necessary to have an inquiry question in order to sustain an on-going inquiry. Yet it is very hard to sustain an inquiry stance without a question, even if that is doable. An ‘area of focus’ might do instead of a question, as for example the concentration on our breathing when we engage in certain forms of meditation. The prime example of a focus in executive coaching might be ‘what the client brings to the session’. In my inquiry process as a coach I might be interested just in what the client brings. A clear bounded area or well-defined question limiting the topic of inquiry helps to contain the experiences, structure the work and measure its progress, yet needs to be held lightly whilst one is engaged in the inquiry. Insight from other domains might just enter into the inquiry process and serve the process rather than distract from it. My attention may, for example, be drawn by ‘how the client presents what she brings to the session’ – and this may or may not illuminate my earlier focus on ‘what the client brings to the session’.

The third problem of inquiry is its impermanence. A pure inquiry is like the flow of

our attention or like our heartbeat: always in motion, never fixed, self-directed as well as responsive. If an inquiry stops flowing, then it dries up, ossifies and turns into 'dogma': it stops being an inquiry and its life saps away before our eyes. On the other hand, once you embark on or ignite any inquiry process you will notice that you enter a natural cycle. A healthy inquiry therefore, is necessarily circular yet also has elements of freshness, more like a spiral.

It is possible to have an unhealthy inquiry as well which is circular, when we are fretting about something or when we are navel gazing. In these cases you have an inquiry that turns in on itself, an inquiry curious of itself only, which stops being fresh, stops taking in new information.

If you have ever tried engaging in a meditation practice, you will have noticed that your attention drifts off and then returns. Something unsettles you or distracts you, brings you out of your meditation, and then you recalibrate or re-find your meditative stance. Inquiry is exactly the same and this is why we often talk about 'inquiry cycles'. Inquiry cycles exist on many levels and time-scales all at once. The smallest cycle is straightforward: take an object in your field of view and try to focus your full attention on that object. You will find that within seconds your attention goes somewhere else, or if not away entirely it may go to a detail or some abstract property of the object; then you will remind yourself, and your attention will flow back to the object. This is the simplest and briefest example of an inquiry cycle. On a larger scale an inquiry cycle can be seen as one particular meeting that you are going to study from a certain aspect, or even a longer experience like a journey or an entire assignment. You will try to stay with the meeting and with the focus of your inquiry for the time it takes, and you will find yourself drifting in and out of focus. At the end of the meeting or journey that particular inquiry is over as the engagement is over. Similarly you could set an hour apart to do an inquiry, for example, set an alarm to remind you of your

timing. Again, this would be a structured inquiry cycle. You would experience many cycles during the hour, yet the hour itself would also be a clearly demarcated cycle. At the end of the hour you will find yourself in the same place, yet somehow enriched or changed by new perspectives, sentiments, experiences, all that you noticed, all that was fresh and all that changed your initial outlook.

The richness of cycles of inquiry is hard to describe, and ever changing. There are cycles of breathing, bodily sensation, cycles of emotions, cycles of thought and deliberation, just to name a few. More so, all these cycles are ever-present and ever-changing, whether we attend to them or not. This is part of why we will not be in the exact same place after we complete what we think of as an inquiry cycle: if we sense we complete one circle we are still mid-way on other cycles which are of different duration or intensity. Take the example of focusing on an object on the table: at the end of that exercise, having completed the cycle of attending to that object, your heart has beaten many cycles, your breathing has probably completed some cycles as well, and yet you only progressed little in the day let alone in longer cycles on the calendar or a lifespan.

Within all these manifold nested cycles there is one movement which is of particular relevance to sitting at the feet of your experience. This is the cycle of your attention, in other words your presence with the inquiry itself. Noticing yourself as you are inquiring you may notice how your concentration grows and wanes. You immerse yourself in your inquiry one moment, you don't even think about it a moment later. These cycles of 'concentration' and 'distraction', which we could also call cycles of experiencing and reflecting, are ever present. They are like the tides of your mind, a continuing ebb and flow of offering attention, drawing it back, becoming lively, letting go, switching on, switching off, immersion, reflection, in endless cycles. In my experience something interesting happens each time the waves of

attention flood your inquiry and then flow back again. If you notice carefully you will see that there is a small ‘correction’ every time this happens: a conscious shift of attention, a small critique within your inquiry, or a tiny assessment of what you are just experiencing. In my experience we shift from inquiry to meta-inquiry and back during each one of these moments. We focus and then we think about our focus, and then we focus again. We cannot do both at the same time: we cannot attend *and* reflect on our attending, we cannot inquire *and* reap the fruits of our inquiry. These things happen sequentially, not in parallel. To find, learn, change or progress in the inquiry one needs both, one needs immersion and one needs realisation. In other words it is on the cusp of this oscillation that something new happens, or some opportunity for inquiry gets lost, time and time again.

During these cycles not only the fruits of inquiry change, also the questions of inquiry change. The impermanence stretches out to the inquiry itself and to its focus. Engaging in inquiry may change the question or focus of inquiry, and that is fine. Indeed, often it is a good sign if the initial topic for an inquiry is changed by the inquiry itself. It is a good indication that something meaningful, something refreshing and new, may have taken place during the inquiry.

Case Example: *A client decided to send me an overview of topics for our next coaching session, a few days ahead of the session. A list of eight bullet points which I realised was in a way pre-empting our session. Interestingly, and probably because the client had recently participated in many a formal meeting, he had put ‘Any other business’ as the ninth bullet point, as if acknowledging that things might also be discovered during a coaching session. At the start of our coaching conversation there was a pregnant silence and the client said, ‘Oh yes, you want me to start don’t you’. He said a few things about feeling more lively and energised recently. Then he embarked with some hesitation on his bullet point number one. I decided to thank him for the list of topics and said that*

I was particularly interested in the ‘any other business’ – what might that be? We both laughed heartily at the idea of ‘any other business’ for a coaching session. Gradually a conversation developed which covered but also went beyond the various topics and bullet points, in a considered, reflective way. Through starting the session in an open and inquiring manner we allowed fresh reflection to emerge early on and for existing reflection to branch out into new perspectives.

There is ample evidence from research (see, for example, Davis & Hayes, 2011, for a review) that cycles of inquiry and in particular mindfulness practices have demonstrable positive effects, for example, on the ability to focus, on the ability to regulate emotions, on lowering levels of stress, anxiety and rumination, and on heightening the capacity for empathy. However, bear in mind that an inquiring mind, a true sceptic, would not attach too much importance to such findings even if in this particular case they bear out his own views. Mindfulness has gained a huge popularity and following in less than two decades so it is to be expected that powerful research is now coming out demonstrating the benefits of this inquiry process.

Here is a summary of the three challenges of inquiry, which can also be seen as three pillars one has to have in place for any inquiry:

1. We need to suspend judgement regarding the inquiry itself, and hold lightly the consideration whether we are doing ‘it’ right or not;
2. We need to find some anchor in a particular object or area of inquiry, often expressed by our ‘inquiry topic’; also, we need to suspend judgement with regard to this anchor itself and appreciate its impermanence;
3. We need to navigate our way through nested cycles of inquiry, reaping insights or findings of more permanence from the ever-present fluctuations, oscillations and transitions of attention.

How not knowing and inquiry can free up your executive coaching practice

Sextus Empiricus distinguished 10 broad areas to be sceptical – or to inquire – about, which he says may be broken down into three categories:

1. we may be sceptical of *ourselves* as ‘subjective’ perceivers;
2. we may be sceptical of the ‘objective’ *world* around us; and
3. we may be sceptical about the *relationship* between perceiver and the world (S.E. I.38; italics mine).

In executive coaching, similarly, we can be sceptical about ourselves as the observer-participants, the other person and the ‘material’ of coaching, and the relationship between the two partners, or the coaching relationship. So if we follow through the same ‘minimalist’ inquiry as described above within our executive coaching work, we now sit at the feet of our experience with our coaching clients and gently inquire into

1. our own state of mind, feelings, impressions, and in particular our ‘felt’ bodily sense as we are engaged in the coaching relationship;
2. our client and partner, and the material he or she is bringing to this coaching session at this very moment; and
3. the relationship of coaching as it unfolds and what is going on within that relationship that may shed light on one of the other fields of inquiry.

The inquiry process that Sextus Empiricus recommends prepares one for a purer, more grounded stance during coaching. We may not change anything in our coaching approach, yet we develop a more reflective stance towards what we are doing. We listen out for and notice the material, our responses to the material, our attraction to certain aspects and our moving away from other aspects, our values and judgements building up, and our secondary responses to these responses to the situation and the material, etc. We try to stay as much as possible with the experience itself and our direct impressions, and hold any of our

judgements, hypotheses, memories, and thoughts, which are bound to emerge incessantly, as lightly as possible.

As an example let us look at my process notes from the first few minutes of the eighth and last encounter with a client.

Case Example: *Just before the session I realise first that I am slightly rushed as I arrive shortly before, and then I find out that something has gone wrong with room reservations so that we are in a different room than usual. I notice my own feelings about this and some tension building up. I also notice how I am making a conscious effort to calm down. Then I am aware of my client walking in. I notice facial expressions, indications of mood, anxiety. I notice the different environment of the ‘new’ room, and I find myself wondering how my client is responding to this room change. My client tells me he has asked and was granted a reduction of responsibilities in his job. I notice his delight and his confidence, and also his slight embarrassment. A memory comes up, from an earlier session; regarding the expert-witness work my client enjoys doing outside of his job. He will have more time for that. I notice myself wanting to make a note, apparently not wanting to lose that thought. I venture an observation on the new arrangement. I notice my client finds my observation challenging. I notice tension in my chest. I keep noticing how my client seems cautious and slightly taken aback. I am not sure whether I have lost him here. Something seems to be brewing inside him. I decide to say something about the effect of my observation. I name an emotion which he recognises. We are now both more relaxed. There is a similar mixture of confidence and embarrassment now between us as I noticed within the client just a minute ago. I notice myself wondering how the client wants to use this final session.*

In a study of 86 descriptions of critical moments from coaching practice written up by inexperienced coaches (De Haan, 2008b) I have found that critical moments of beginning coaches are strongly characterised by doubts. More experienced coaches tend to feel more secure about their critical moments, and even if they are tense and anxious in their

most critical work, they have been shown to be a lot less doubtful than beginning coaches (Day, De Haan, Sills et al., 2008). What the inquiry process tries to do is to keep those doubts fresh and vivid. We try to keep inquiring into our lived experience in an open, fresh and curious way, deferring judgement as much as possible. Then we try to retain this position of curiosity, ambiguity and doubt, which lies at the basis of every coaching contract, over a longer period of time, ideally over the full length of the contract.

Reflective, sceptical inquiry can be used on many levels. It has been used in a recent book by coaching practitioners writing about their practice and in the interest of the authors' own longer-term professional development as executive coaches (De Haan et al., 2013). It can also be used on a session-by-session level as we offer our clients this most basic offer of a coach: grounded, open and reflective presence. Thirdly, inquiry will be used by our coaching clients as well, whether they call it inquiry or not, to deepen their reflections on their circumstances. We may at several times during coaching assignments help our clients actively to develop a more reflective stance, by noticing together with the client and inviting the client to notice. In these terms executive coaching consists of building up a stream of reflectiveness and doubt alongside the convictions and action orientation of the client.

Case Example: *I remember one senior board-level client in the telecoms industry that I worked with for several years, who radiated his executive presence and control, and quite often approached me in a manner similar to how he would approach say an IT contractor, letting me know about his progress and where he might have a query for me. I responded with little more than just my observations, letting him know what I had understood of his progress and of his queries, and also how I noticed his stance towards his progress and towards me. On his final feedback form he described the impact of my reflective presence: 'I think the moments where difficult questions were asked about my behaviour or honest feedback about what I have*

said, stand out for me. I enjoy the direct feedback during our conversations, about the job and the whole environment around it'.

There is another way in which a sceptical stance in the vein of Sextus Empiricus is groundwork for coaching. Executive coaching 'material', the stuff of coaching, often starts off in a rather dogmatic and formulaic way, in the shape of repetitive thinking about experiences which appears to be dished up to 'entertain' or 'cover' the coach and the coaching session. Coaches enter from a position of advantage here, as they come fresh to this material. By remaining fresh and inquisitive they can tear down stilted thinking and rash conclusions, to open up space for new reflection on the client's original experiences. Sextus Empiricus has shown us the way to do this, in books with titles such as *Against the dogmatists*, *Against the professors*, and *Against the logicians*.

If inquiry is the groundwork for coaching, then based on the previous section we can intuit the groundwork for this groundwork. In that section it was suggested that the underpinning foundations of inquiry are:

1. letting go of the pressure to do it right;
2. having a clear anchor or inquiry question, which in a coaching session might be to understand what the client brings; and
3. navigating and extracting insight from impermanence and nested cycles.

In other words, sitting at the feet of your experience means opening up space by suspending judgement, anchoring your perspective and letting go, reaping from experience and again letting go, and opening up space again, and so on in continuing cycles of experience and inquiry.

I end with the same quote and with the same reminder that the stuff of any inquiry is 'just' tentative, 'just' lived personal experience: mostly observations and hypotheses – with very few conclusions. Whenever you report back summaries or broader results of a 'listening exercise', or even of a longer inquiry, make sure that you remember this truth:

Of none of our future statements do we positively affirm that the fact is exactly as we state it, but we simply record each fact, like a chronicler, as it appears to us at the moment. (SE I.4)

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