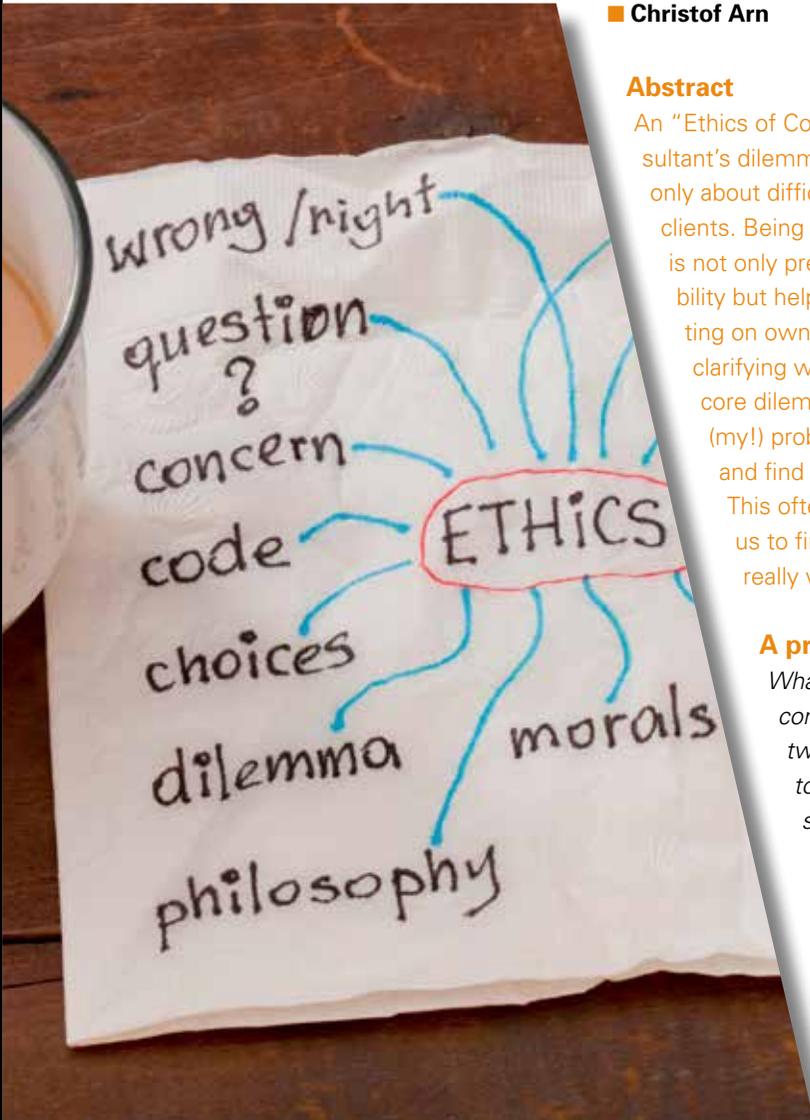# Ethics of Consultancy

A Practical Overview

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Abstract

An "Ethics of Consultancy" is about the supervisor's, coach's or consultant's dilemmas. Thus, it is primarily about their own values, not only about difficult situations and decisions they face in the work with clients. Being able to distinguish one's own dilemmas from the clients' is not only preventing the supervisor from taking too much responsibility but helps to take appropriate responsibility—mainly by: reflecting on own personal values at stake in an actual situation, and by clarifying which values conflict most and therefore represent the core dilemma. This specific value conflict is not only the core of the (my!) problem I face, but also the starting point to become creative and find a helpful next step to deliberately take my responsibility. This often will help clients more than we would think—and helps us to find ourselves at the end of the day having done what we really wanted to.

A practical overview

What are we talking about when we talk about ethics in consultancy? This article is exploring some treasures from two and a half thousand years of history of ethics relevant to consultancy. It's not simply about values, but about the supervisor's, coach's and consultant's values.

After laying out A) what the topic of "ethics of consultancy" is about, and B) what scientific ethics can contribute to it, under C) some overarching main topics will be discussed, all of which will lead to D) the practice of ethics in consultancy.

A) What are some questions at stake around ethics of consultancy? And: What are "ethical questions" at all?

- Clients have ethical questions: My client is considering whether she would rather tell her business colleague the "whole truth" about a situation or communicate carefully a summary of selected parts of it not to snub her colleague. However, might communicating "half of the truth" be more about protecting herself rather than considering the emotions of her colleague?
- Client systems have ethical issues: families, for example, typically look implicitly for values that make them up as a family: Adventurousness? Security and safety? Openness for other people? Willingness to deal with conflict?
- Organizations have ethical questions: How do we navigate within our feedback system between control, systematic support and self-directed development?
- Societies have ethical questions, e.g. about justice: Even if societies as such cannot be our clients, their ethical questions are often present.
- As counselors, we have ethical questions: How much and what responsibility, and what for, is up to me, and how much and which responsibility lies with my clients? Do I share the values behind a particular consultancy approach? Do I support a client in an undertaking that I find dubious?

Of all these questions, the focus in ethics of consultancy is clearly on the latter: *the ethical questions of the counselor.* However, all the other questions are also present in the consultancy setting, and to list them here is important at least for the purpose of differentiating the genuinely own ethical questions of the counselor from the others. To tackle openly and consciously one's own ethical questions when working as a supervisor, coach or consultant

is often one of the keys to being able to deal effectively with clients' issues.

There is, however, a fundamental level of "ethics of consultancy" which goes beyond "consultancy ethics": Is consultancy as such good? When or in which situations or under which conditions is consultancy appropriate? Fundamentally challenged: *Is consultancy as such a good idea?* Even if we are inclined to answer this question with yes, the more openly and critically we can ask exactly that question, the deeper the self-reflection as well as the reflection on consultancy, finally the better the quality of our work will be.

What connects all these questions listed above is: They all are about values (Fenner 2020). Whenever we are really concerned with an ethical question—and whenever we realize responsibility in our own lives—it is not just about values in general, but about *our values*. When we get involved, we always think about a specific question—and at the same time about ourselves. This is what people often oversee or even suppress, also and especially counselors. Highly engaged and passionate as we are, we talk about the values (and value conflicts) of the clients, about the lack of values in organizations or society, and we do not realize that we are talking about ourselves: While characterizing others and judging their values, we may show more about our own values than we may be aware of. (A helpful theoretical discussion of this is connected to the term "moral communication", Luhmann 2011). If we face the fact that it is always about a specific situation *and* about our own values at the same time, we not only gain more clarity about the task at hand, but also access potential for additional benefit: I can find convincing answers to actual questions and solutions for upcoming decisions *as well* as I learn more about myself and receive impulses for my own personal development.

In particular, we gain immediate access to the core of an ethical question, the "ethical dilemma" (Brune 2011; Arn 2009) by trying to identify which two values are in a strong conflict with each other in a specific consultancy situation at hand. Clearly defined step-by-step procedures can facilitate the process of a systematic ethical reflection (find an example of a compact procedure in Arn 2011, other procedures in Hurst et. al. 2012).

The first question above under A) shows quite well how the main dilemma often does not lie where it seems to lie at first. Openness and depth in one's own reflection can lead to interesting discoveries: My dilemma may not be between telling the "unembellished truth" by following the value »honesty« or to protect my client against the "shock about the whole truth" by following the value »care« (for the client). It might just as well be between telling the unembellished truth or to protect myself by communicating only part of the truth. To »care« for myself is honorable, too! But is something else.

B) What can scientific ethics do?

I define ethics as the »reflection of moral« as it is defined within the European ethics tradition, while in the english speaking ethics community »ethics« and »moral« are terms used very similarly. When differentiating ethics and moral, understanding ethics as a "moral theory", ethics is so to say neutral in value. But neutral in value does not mean uncritical! Scientific ethics can much better point out logical errors from this neutral perspective, uncover overlooked points in argumentation and correct biased thinking and such.

In addition to this neutral support for clear and comprehensive thinking, ethics as a discipline is also positional in a certain sense—in fact "multi-positional": The discipline of ethics with its two and a half millennia of history has

developed something like a "core value horizon". This integrates different directions and streams of ethics (sometimes also called "ethics theories") such as Kantianism, Care-Ethics, Utilitarianism, Discourse Ethics and others. All these "schools of ethics" typically have a main concern, a core value (or two or three). Gathering these values of all those important directions and streams of ethics together, current forms of scientific ethics compose a horizon of orientation in a "coherent" way. It is worthwhile learning to focus at least briefly on each of these core values and to explore their relevance for any important upcoming decision. (Brief overview in Arn 2009, more precisely e.g. in Pauer-Studer 2011)

C) Focal points such as "guilt", "successful life", "consultancy values"

The main topic in ethics of consultancy are specific questions from the everyday business of supervision, coaching and consulting. Some examples are listed under A) at the last bullet point. In addition, ethics of consultancy may be about some rather general and therefore more fundamental ethical topics:

- Feelings of guilt are quite often a denial of responsibility: "feeling bad" takes the place of "taking responsibility". Suffering from being guilty could be a welcome alternative to taking responsibility.

Table 1. Attempt to give an overview of schools and directions of ethics

Direction/ School/ "Theory"	Examples of core values
Kantianism	Dignity; Generalizability; Self-determination
Care-Ethics	Connectedness; Care
Utilitarianism	Happiness (of all concerned)
Discourse Ethics	Participation; common reason; listening
…	…

Some core points about what the discipline of ethics can do for the daily job of counselors:

- *sharpen the focus on ethical dilemmas*
- *provide guidance by a broad but finite set of axiomatic values*
- *raise awareness of some emotion or thought traps*

- Seeing a "good life" as the core value seems to be a "warmer" approach to ethics than Kantianism or utilitarian ethics in their strictness, thus has received greater attention in the last two decades. Sometimes, though, such approaches struggle with the real "down sides of life"—and thus with an integration of the destructive. The neutrality of ethics could contribute to this by not devaluing destructiveness in oneself and others so quickly that it becomes a blind spot.
- Every (!) consultancy approach has a value base. This base typically is not questioned—indeed, often not even seen openly—by most of its representatives. Ethics offer a methodology to deal with value bases and with the strengths as well as the weaknesses of different consultancy schools just a tick more consciously.

- Talking about the "image of mankind" in a counseling or educational approach quite often obscures more than it helps: it typically mixes descriptive and normative views on mankind—and thus comes close to the "is-ought fallacy" (Zuber in Arn 2009, 137-138).

D) Ethics in consultancy—levels and places

In order to prevent ethics from becoming moralistic—since moral has to be the object ethics are reflecting on—it is important to stand with one's own values while maintaining an openness to their reflection and development. This applies to individual values of the counselor, especially in the face of demanding counseling situations; it also applies to the values of a professional group, such as those e.g. in the ethics code of a consultants' or supervisors' association (analogous to ethics codes of other professional associations). It therefore makes sense that specific places and times are dedicated and cultivated for the purpose of ethical reflection, informally as well as systematically. Intervision as well as supervision, for example, are helpful places to regularly practice ethical reflection on issues relevant to one's own consultancy practice. Specific further education on methods of ethical reflection (which is different from education on ethically relevant topics in consultancy), joint research activities in the broad and narrow sense on ethical questions as well as any other defined settings that engage discourse on ethics of consultancy—they all contribute to the quality of supervision, coaching and consulting as a significant work with and for people in a world that gains more and more complexity.

E) PS

Specific ethical reflection, once learned, can also be shared with clients as—once more—a consulting method. ■

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