

Philosophical Foundations of Coaching: Ontology

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In this essay we wish to focus on two dimensions of ontology that hold profound implications for the practice of professional coaching. One of these dimension concerns the static or dynamic nature of one’s notion about being. Can we define a state of being that is stable—is “being” a noun—or is any statement regarding the state of being always in flux—is “being” a verb? The second dimension concerns the basic assumption that it is or is not possible to accurately describe and validate a description of reality. Those who believe this description is possible are called “objectivists” and those who believe it is not are called “constructivists.” We propose that four ontological perspectives can be identified when these two dimensions are combined. We focus in particular on a dynamic constructivist perspective regarding the world in which coaching clients live and work.

Two events precipitated this article on the relationship between ontology and coaching. The first event was the interview which one of us conducted with Julio Olalla in an issue of the *International Journal of Coaching in Organizations* (Olalla and Bergquist, 2008). The second event was the first meeting between the two of us in Oslo, Norway. During a symposium conducted by the International Consortium for Coaching in Organizations (ICCO), the two of us had a chance to walk and talk together on the roof of the new Opera House in Oslo (a remarkable architectural feat). We discovered that we shared much in common about the interplay between philosophy and coaching, as well as about the challenges of thinking in new ways to meet the unique features of 21st century life.

In our conversations about ontology and coaching, we have encountered a wide variety of definitions and meanings assigned to the word “ontology.” While all (or at least most) perspectives on ontology are concerned with one very ambitious undertaking—understanding the nature of being—there are many different turns and pathways that one can take on the way to this understanding. In general, we would propose that there are two interrelated dimensions that help to discriminate among these differing definitions and meanings. One dimension concerns the static or dynamic nature of one’s notion about being. Is “being” a noun or a verb? Are we talking about an object or about a process? The second dimension concerns the basic assumption that it is or is not possible to ultimately identify the basic nature of being—in other words, to accurately describe and validate a description of reality. Those who believe this description is possible are called “objectivists” and those who believe it is not possible are called “constructivists.” Four different ontological perspectives are available when one combines these two dimensions (see Table 1).

Table 1. Four Ontological Perspectives

	<i>Static Notion About Being</i>	<i>Dynamic Notion About Being</i>
<i>Objectivist Perspective Regarding Being</i>	<i>Technical Rationality: Objective and verified description of a stable reality</i>	<i>Platonic Ideals: Screened and interpreted version of an external stable reality</i>
<i>Constructivist Perspective Regarding Being</i>	<i>Societal Inventions: Biased and resistant descriptions of reality</i>	<i>Contextual Interactions: Reality created in the interplay between two of more people and/or events</i>

While these four ontological perspectives are inherently of some interest to those who are involved with the field of epistemology (study of knowledge acquisition), they are also directly relevant to field of coaching—as Julio Olalla has so ably demonstrated in his work. Coaching is concerned with how clients define their own being—their sense of self. Each of these four ontological perspectives defines one’s sense of self in a quite different manner. These four perspectives do not simply involve different belief systems. They encompass different notions about the very nature of a belief system, and in this sense are profoundly different from one another.

Static Objectivism: Technical Rationality

In our analysis of ontology, we would propose that there are two different perspectives regarding the nature of being and, more basically, the nature of reality. One of these perspectives might best be called *objectivism*. The advocates for this perspective assume that there is a reality out there that we can know and articulate. There are universal truths or at least universal principles that can be applied to the improvement of the human condition, resolution of human conflicts, restoration of human rights, or even construction of a global order and community. Donald Schön (1983) suggests that this perspective emerges from and remains closely associated with a tradition that he calls “technical rationality.”

We are also witnessing a parallel emergence of what we may call “bio-centrism”—this is an objectivist perspective defining human beings as an objective and stable reality. From this static and objectivist perspective, we begin with

the assumption that our identity and our decisions are “wired in” to our neurological structures and basically pre-set at birth. While we certainly should acknowledge that we are not a “blank slate” at birth (Pinker, 2002) we also must realize that much occurs after birth and the environment impacts in a profound manner even on neurological development prior to birth. Furthermore, neuroscientists (cf. Rose, 2005) are coming to realize that the level of complexity in neurological structures and processes make it very difficult, if not impossible, to equate mind with brain. There is a level of analysis that moves well beyond neural structures and well beyond the “wet-mind” (biological base of mind) to a “dry-mind” that is transcendent and perhaps even spiritual in nature.

The bio-centric, objectivist perspective has served us well for several centuries. It has enabled us to make great advances in medical and cultural science; however, this perspective has also created many problems with which we now live. From a bio-centric objectivist perspective, the human body, included the brain, was (and is) perceived as an advanced machine that can be altered and repaired. This perspective can be retraced to the central principles of modernity: determinism and progress. While there is a tendency to coach from this perspective, this is a very limited (and limiting) approach to coaching—especially when the people we are coaching base their notion of “self” and “being” on this perspective – “being” as a given, with some potential for improvement.

Dynamic Objectivism: The Platonic Ideal

While many of the critiques of static objectivism are products of late 20th century and early 21st century thought, there is a much earlier source: Plato offers a dynamic objectivism through his allegory of the cave. Let’s briefly visit this cave. According to Plato, we are all living in a cave and never gain a clear view of reality, but instead view the shadows that are projected on the walls of the cave. We live with an image of reality (shadows on the wall of the cave) rather than with reality itself—which makes our sense of reality quite dynamic and a source of considerable tension. Plato, an idealist, notes that we have no basis for knowing whether we are seeing the shadow or seeing reality, given that we have always lived in the cave. Plato thus speaks to us from many centuries past about the potential fallacy to be found in a static objectivist perspective regarding the world—since we can never know whether we are living in the cave or living in the world of reality outside the cave.

Today, we live with an expanded cast of characters in the cave. First, there is something or someone standing near the opening of the cave. It can be cultural or personal narratives that we are met with on our daily life, narratives and perspectives that block out some of the light coming into the cave. Not only don’t we actually see reality, there is something that determines which parts of objective reality get projected onto the wall. This is what makes the Platonic objectivism dynamic—for those holding the partition have grown up in the cave, but may hold a quite different agenda from other cave dwellers. There is yet another character in our contemporary cave. This is the interpreter or reporter or analyst. We actually don’t have enough time in our busy lives to look directly at the wall to see the shadows that are projected on the wall from the “real” world. The cave has grown very large and we often can’t even see the walls of the cave and the shadows. We wait for the interpreter to tell us what is being projected on the wall and what the implications of these images are for us in our lives.

We are thus removed three steps from reality. We believe that the shadows on Plato's cave are "reality." We don't recognize that someone is standing at the entrance to the cave and selectively determining which aspects of reality get projected onto the wall. Finally, someone else is standing inside the cave offering us a description and analysis. We can hope for a direct experience and we suggest that a coach can assist in this process. Yet, we remained confused about what is "real" and often don't trust our direct experience. We move, with great reluctance and considerable grieving, to a recognition that reality is being constructed for us and that we need to attend not only to the constructions, but also to the interests and motives of those who stand at the entrance to the cave and those who offer us their interpretations. We must move, in other words, from an objectivist perspective (whether it be static or dynamic) to a constructivist perspective.

Plato's cave and his dynamic objectivism do provide us with the opportunity to gain insights in a coaching session about the nature of the cave, the world that is projected onto the walls of the cave, and the nature and agenda of the interpreters. We should also consider whether or not to step outside the cave (direct experience). Can we actually step outside the cave? How does the coach assist us in stepping outside the cave? Is it safer to remain inside the cave then to venture outside without the help of interpreters? Should we (and can we) face the profound challenge of unmediated experiences? Should (and can) a coach help us by inviting us to step outside the cave and by helping us recognize ways in which we still carry the cave shadows and cave interpreters with us when stepping outside the cave? As we step outside the cave, are we likely to confront some objective reality through our experience, or is the experience itself constantly shifting depending on setting, context, interpersonal relationships and the nature of our own past experience? These questions lead us as coaches and leaders down a path to which Julio points in his interview. It is a pathway toward constructivism.

Static Constructivism: Societal Invention

Social constructivism has offered Western thought quite a challenge (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Advocates believe that we construct our own social realities, based in large part on societal inventions—the traditions and needs of culture and the social-economic context in which we find ourselves. There are no universal truths or principles, nor are there any global models of justice or order that can be applied in all settings, at all times, with all people. While this constructivist perspective is often considered a product of late 20th century thought (at least in the Western world) the early versions of social constructivism can be traced back to the anthropology and sociology of the early 20th century. Reports from these disciplines documented radically different perspectives operating in many nonwestern societies and cultures regarding the nature of reality and ways in which members of diverse communities view themselves and their interpersonal and group relationships.

This initial version of constructivism is essentially static, for these social constructions are based on deeply rooted beliefs and assumptions of specific societies and cultures. There are specific communities that espouse their own unique ways of knowing. These communities may consist of people who are living together or people who are working together. Organizations create their own culture and their own constructions of reality. Specific ways of

knowing are based on and reinforced by the community and do not allow for significant divergence among those living in the community. Furthermore, while these ways of knowing may themselves change over time and in differing situations, such changes are gradual and often not noticed for many years.

We thus find a constructivism that is static and a process of coaching that focuses on surfacing these stable, but often unacknowledged and very powerful, societal assumptions and beliefs. It is the role of the coach to challenge these assumptions and beliefs and to help clients trace out the implications of these societal constructions for their own actions as members and even leaders of these societies and cultures. As anthropologists and sociologists, organizational coaches should understand something about the culture of their society—or of a specific organization. One of us (Bergquist and Brock, 2008) recently wrote about six unique cultures that exist in most contemporary organizations. Each of these cultures has its own stable construction of reality and is resistant to change. Coaches themselves dwell in one or more of these six cultures, hence have their own biased perspectives that are created by and reinforced within these cultures. Thus, as Julio would seem to suggest, it is critical for coaches to not only help their clients become aware of their social constructions, but also become aware of the ways in which they, as coaches, construct their own realities.

Dynamic Constructivism: Contextual Interactions

While the objectivist perspective was prevalent during the modern era, and is still influencing our notions about “being,” the static constructivist perspective often played a role as counter-point in 20th century social discourse. This static constructivism has been a source of many challenges that have upset the modernist stance on epistemology and ethics. The static constructivists have encouraged or even forced many of us to move from an absolute set of principles to a more situation-based relativism. Even greater challenges, however, are present. A dynamic constructivism moves well beyond the stability of broad-based societal and cultural perspectives. The emergence of a dynamic constructivist perspective represents a revolutionary change in the true sense of the term

Language, narratives and self

Story and performance are hallmarks of dynamic constructivism. We live in a world of constructed realities that are constantly shifting. We live in a world of language, semiotics and narratives. Language is no longer considered simply a handmaiden for reality, as the objectivists would suggest, nor does it construct a permanent or at least resistant reality as the traditional social constructivists would argue. Furthermore, language is not a secondary vehicle we must employ when commenting on the reality that underlies and is the reference point for this language. The dynamic constructivists often take this analysis one step further by proposing that language is itself the primary reality in our daily life experiences. Language, originally and primarily relationship-based, assumes its own reality, and ceases to be an abstract sign that substitutes for the “real” things. Our cave is filled with language and conversations. This is reality—there is nothing outside the cave (or perhaps the cave doesn’t even exist).

While objectivism is based on the assumption that there is a constant reality to which one can refer (through the use of language and other symbol/sign systems) and static constructivism is based on the assumption that there is a constant societal base for our constructions of reality, dynamic constructivism is based on the assumption that *the mode and content of discourse and the relationship(s) that underlie this discourse are the closest thing we have to a reality. We are constantly reconstructing our reality because this reality is based on the specific relationship through which we are engaged via our discourse.* We need not stay within Plato’s cave, because the relationship and the discourse is itself reality—it is not just a reflection of the reality. The inside and outside of the cave are one in the same thing. The cave doesn’t exist. Consequently, the process of coaching becomes a powerful (even critical) process, for it can alter reality for both the client and coach.

Narratives of our time and of our self

We are often distant from many of the most important events that impact on our lives. We live in a complex, global community and we have many connections to a vaster world. Yet, we can no longer have direct experience of, nor can we have much influence over, this world. The cave has grown much larger than Plato might have imagined and may no longer even exist. The only access we have to this vast world is through language and narratives. As a result, we often share narratives about things and events rather than actually experiencing them. Language itself becomes the shared experience. This perspective does not differ greatly, on first review, from that offered by Plato. The narratives may be considered nothing more than second-hand conversations about the images of the cave’s walls. Yet, there is a difference, for the narratives and conversations are not just about experiences, they are themselves experiences.

This sense of a constructed reality that is reinforced by narrative and conversation is a starting point for dynamic constructivism—just as it is a starting point for traditional and static forms of constructivism. The key point with regard to a dynamic constructivism is that each specific conversation is itself a reality. Shared narratives and language are where we actually meet - self and others, self and society, self and shared cultural narrative. From this perspective, our stories about self constitute our fundamental sense of self—they are the building blocks of our identity.

Perhaps our stories about self are everything we mean by the term “self.” This would suggest that our stories about childhood, about major adult accomplishments, and about difficult lifelong disappointments may be the basic building blocks of self-image—whether or not they are accurate. Contemporary coaches, like Julio Olalla and David Drake (Drake, Brennan & Gørtz, 2008), emphasize the role of narrative for a good reason—narrative is a very powerful and influential tool. We are profoundly impacted by two often unacknowledged (or even unseen) forces in these narratives. First, we are influenced by the broad-based social constructions of reality which is conveyed through the stories of the society and organization in which we find ourselves. This is the contribution made by static constructivists. Second, we are influenced by a more narrowly based personal construction of reality that is

conveyed through stories we tell about ourselves (and perhaps stories that we inherit from and about our family and immediate community).

The hermeneutic circle and use of metaphors

There is actually a third level of narrative which makes the dynamics of constructivism and coaching even more complex and challenging. We are co-creating narratives (and ultimately creating reality) with other people—those with whom we are interacting. All meanings or statements are referring to a system of narratives and semiotics, but this is in itself an open-ended system of signs referring to signs referring to signs. No concept can therefore have an ultimate, unequivocal meaning (Weaver, 1996, p. 171). We can illustrate this complex, nested dynamic—called the hermeneutic circle—by turning to narratives and conversations that occur within a workplace. For example, once the manager of a specific department has spoken, the reality that was created when she spoke is no longer present. Even if she says the same words, they are spoken in a different context, hence have somewhat different meaning. Thus, even when our manager is “speaking”—in the form of vocalized or written words or in the form of other images (visual, tactile)—these words or images will have different meaning each time they are interpreted. Meaning will shift depending on who hears the statement, what the setting is in which the communication takes place, and which words or images have preceded and will follow these efforts at communication. According to the dynamic constructivists, therefore, reality for the 21st century manager is a shifting phenomenon that is subject to change and uncertainty, meant to be expressed in nuanced, ever-changing ways, again and again, in response to new contexts.

More than ever, our organizations are based on and dependent on these dynamic interpersonal conversations and shifting, context-based narratives. Most people, resources and attention in present-day organizations are devoted not to the direct production of goods or direct provision of services, but to the use of verbal and written modes of communication about these goods and services. Given these conditions, story telling and narrative are central to 21st century leadership. Stories are the lifeblood and source of system maintenance in both personal and organizational lives. The construction of stories about organizational successes and failures by leaders is critical to the processes of personal and organizational transformation. Clearly, the conversations that are most effective in bringing about organizational integration frequently take the form of metaphors that are conveyed through stories. (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) Metaphors are used to portray something about an organization—in particular something about leadership, authority, and values. These metaphors are central to the organization, for they contribute to the conversations that are at the heart of the organization. They point to a shared set of signs and narratives, and as such create, recreate and strengthen the experience of shared values.

The stories of an organization are important to fully appreciate for yet another reason: they are critical bridges between the present and past. Organizations exist at the present moment in time. The past life of an organization exists largely in the present conversations, i.e., the stories about the past. It also exists in the conversations that are now taking place about past conversations (via archival records). The formal records of the organization are the conversations that take place between people who are of the present and the past. Similarly, the organization’s future

is shaped in current conversations about this future. Narratives actually do more than tell stories, they create a framework in which the identity of the organization is perceived and presented. Story-telling is a central ingredient in relationships. Relationships, in turn, become important in the reconstruction of reality—whether this reality be personal or organizational in nature.

Several questions arise from this dynamic constructivism. In what way(s) do the personal and organizational narratives and images influence or alter one another? Is there a shift in the organization’s narrative when a new top manager is hired, or the organization itself is restructured? From the perspective of the coach, there are major concerns with regard to the nature of narrative and identity that is being conveyed by the organization and the narrative and identity of each employee –and in particular the person receiving coaching services

Conclusions

The movement from an objectivist to a constructivist ontology and from a static to a dynamic ontology requires commitment and courage—particularly courage. Our sense of self and reality—our ontological reality—is always in flux. How do we live with this ontological uncertainty? The remarkable theologian, Paul Tillich (2000) has written about the existential (and theological) “courage to be”—the courage needed to acknowledge one’s being and one’s becoming in the world. If human beings are minds, and not just brains, then they are also inherently spiritual in nature or at least there are spiritual demands being made on them as they are confronted with the challenging universe in which they live.

As spiritual beings, we have the capacity to reflect on our own experiences and to place these experiences in space and time. This is the human challenge, the human opportunity and the human curse of transcendence. Our sense of a constantly reconstructed universe, based in our interactions with other people, leads us inevitably to a sense of bewilderment. At a more immediate level, we are confronted as leaders and coaches with the complexity, unpredictability and turbulence of contemporary organizational life. How does one find the courage to stand in the face of this “awe-full-ness”? And more to the point, what is the role to be played by organizational coaches in assisting their clients (as well as facing their own personal challenges)?

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