

NO! - An Ontological Perspective

Alexander Berlonghi, M.S.

08-14-2013

Coaches will often assist their coachees in respect to the freedom of saying *NO*, or living with their own reactions and emotions when others say *NO* to them. All is well and good in terms of a coachee being empowered to produce certain results in daily conversations at work or home. It's great when psychologically we learn to live in our social environments with increased balance and harmony. However, most coaching and conversation about *NO* has been much too superficial; useful perhaps, for a specific result, but far from a permanent shift in how we are in our everyday world.

There is a point of view that goes deeper – our ontological perspective. What is happening from an ontological perspective with *NO*? That is, for humans, what is the *being itself* or the *living spirit* of *NO*? What can *NO* reveal about *WHO WE ARE* that perhaps is hidden and escapes us in our daily living?

It doesn't really matter if most of us don't remember the first time we screamed “*NO!*” at the top of our lungs. Nearly every child does it at some point. There are many psychological explanations that may vary from person to person, but those points of view have not made much of a difference, especially for the little person in the middle of that moment of high decibel expression. So what is *NO* all about? Is a child's *NO* listened to for what it is, or do we prefer to shift our focus on various explanations for it? Perhaps those child development explanations are really superficial justifications that allow adults to avoid seeing something that is happening more profoundly.

Some will say that after every *NO* there lives a *YES*. Philosophically or poetically that might be a satisfying paradox or polarity to play with or explore, but the attention in the conversation then shifts to the relationship with *YES* instead of focusing on *NO* itself. *NO* is so difficult for some of us to stick with, to listen to, or to say! So what is *NO* all about? Let's take a brief look.

The older ones among us in the USA remember when no black person could sit on certain buses, live in certain neighborhoods, go to certain schools, eat in certain restaurants, and use certain bathrooms.

What were those *NO*'s all about? In the USA we explain it with descriptive words such as prejudice, segregation, and racism. Elsewhere it has been called apartheid. But if you are that person who actually is living that *NO*, what is *NO* all about?

In those awful times when a person says *NO* to someone's sexual invitations, advances, impositions, or attacks, and the other does not listen to that *NO*, what is happening? The will and desire of one person does not correspond with the will and desire of another. And what happens touches the victim so profoundly and strongly. What is that *NO* all about?

What happens in the animal world with *NO*? Some ontological coaches maintain that animals do not make such realities as requests and promises because they do not live in time nor have the human capacity for linguistic commitment. Let's take a very quick look at that, as well. Wild animals like mountain lions and elk do what they do without having any existential crises or psychological issues about *NO*. Try budging an elephant or a mule when they simply don't want to move. Those who have attempted to put their domesticated cats into a little box to go somewhere usually are confronted with what we humans would easily identify as a *NO*. What is there in the *being* of an animal's *NO* that we only call instinct as opposed to linguistic? What is an animal's *NO* all about?

Perhaps our looking for explanations, reasons, and justifications for *NO* is somehow related to how we have, for centuries, constituted our being human. What is it in our *being* that reverberates with *NO*?

In order to get to something we do not readily see, we have to remove the veil of talking about choice. This is without a doubt very important in coaching; recognizing the freedom to choose is a monumental step in many people's lives. Reflecting on the ramifications and implications that in our every moment we are making choices opens up new worlds of possibilities for our daily relating and living. Yet, as important as any conversation about choice may be, it too may limit our truly knowing *NO*. Let's take another look at the examples we used above.

A child is a wonderful and adorable little mammal before it learns to be a socialized human.

Is the child saying *NO* to losing the naturalness of being lovingly treated and pampered as a cute little cuddly animal? How much of our animal *being* do we put into the closet by only focusing on our

strictly human development? While all children rightfully must learn to live in and adapt to our human world and this is the way it is, we may be limiting their *being*. Are children screaming *NO* to a humanly constituted reality that is being thrust upon them by surprise, due to the necessity of learning to relate in a human society? We may merely be insisting on their being human as we have framed it. Perhaps all children know this when screaming *NO* in an animal way. It may not be logical or rational, but it is a knowing. But let's not stop here.

What is happening with respect to *NO* in examples of sexual assault, abuse, or violence that go beyond the imposition of will or desire of one over another? Pleasurable and beautiful human sex is shared in moments of *being US*, as opposed to *being only ME or I versus YOU*. When this *US* is present, two people are sensuously and sexually sharing and being *ONE* while simultaneously each is having their own experience. The choice to be and act sexually with each other is natural, free, and joyful when two people are being an *US*. When *US* is missing sex is not the same; even for couples who have been together for years. Surely there is no *US* in rape or abuse. And yet it is happening so much in our world. But let's not stop here.

In the humanly constituted realities of interpersonal disrespect and institutional inequality based on skin color, race, and national origin there is clearly no *US*. All children play with and enjoy each other until they have been socialized not to do so in the name of becoming civilized humans. And this is still happening today so much in our world. But let's not stop here.

We humans have had a difficult time dealing with our addiction for explanations of our human uniqueness. Whether we like it or agree with it, our humanity is being reconstituted culturally, scientifically, religiously, and environmentally all of the time. With Copernicus and Galileo we ceased to be a species located at the center of the universe, revered by the sun and stars. With Darwin, we ceased to be the species created and especially endowed by God with soul and reason. With Freud, we ceased to be the unique species with behavior governed by a rational mind. With the emergence of cybernetics and intelligent computer technology we have ceased being the species uniquely capable of complex manipulation of the environment. But let's not stop here.

Philosophers and psychologists have considered humans to be unique in that we live in time, establish

history, give meaning to life, live with the reality of death, and experience compassion and love. This uniqueness becomes useless when we are always rushing or running out of time, resigned about our purpose for being here, petrified about death, and experiencing profound isolation and social fragmentation in our personal and international relations. Early psychological theories of human consciousness have been cast aside by contemporary theories that the entire universe is conscious. The latest interpretation of our human uniqueness is that we live in a world of linguistic commitment, making requests and promises. While animals may communicate, they do not live in language and commitment. But the results of our unique human ability with respect to acting in commitment don't look so great if we consider our economic, social, environmental, political, and diplomatic realities. But let's not stop here.

The topic has not been changed. This has everything to do with what *NO* is all about! A mule or elephant knows when there is respect, generated in a space of *US*. There are millions of humans who connect with and love animals, and experience this *knowing* profoundly. And while animals may not be linguistic, they don't go against the grain of who they are, forcing each other into being this or that way. Neither do they rape, torture, mass murder, or indiscriminately harm each other.

But where is the ontological perspective in this? Have we missed something? Let's approach what we have been saying in a different way.

We are not suggesting that we can rid our human being of the concept of the *SELF*. This is deeply engrained and at the moment, culturally untouchable. We human beings have historically constituted a person's uniqueness or essential being by referring to the self. In this psychological perspective the self is the unity of human being. The self is an individual person as the object of his or her own reflective consciousness. This psychology of self includes all of the studies and theories of the cognitive and affective representations of one's identity or the subject of experience. This has also permeated many religious and spiritual views about who we are, the nature of our own importance, and today's popular teachings about consciousness. However, no matter how earnestly one promotes this, there is no absolute reality or universal truth to it. And it doesn't matter if it is the dominant and predominant perspective. After all, for a long time the majority of humanity also held that the earth was flat.

An ontological perspective recognizes *US* as the unity of human being. Not metaphorically, poetically, ideally, or wishfully. Children in the womb and their mothers are living and relating as **a single** *US*. This remains so after our children are born, even though there is the appearance of a distinctly existing physical body. In our *being* we are an *US*. It lasts until children begin the profound ontological expression of screaming *NO* in reaction to learning how to be human in the way our human societies have insisted. We teach them to be individual human selves, and then we complain that children are too much *ME, MY, MINE* oriented. After that, they grow up looking for *US* in all their relationships: families, marriages, lovers, friends, brothers & sisters, sports, clubs, favorite hangouts, and even in their teams at work. We start with *US* at conception as a basic ontological unity of our human being. And then we move far away from that with a focus only on our own individuality, consciousness, and self.

This is not a war between *US* versus *SELF*, nor are we making a case for an ontological perspective versus a psychological one. We know the world we are living in has been generated from the point of view of the *SELF* as the psychological unity of human being. We are in the middle of it. Reconstituting our world to include *US* as the ontological unity of *being* is both an opportunity and a distinct possibility.

We humans have been missing the balance and harmony of *US*. When the balance and harmony of a child's *US* is threatened, a *NO* will show up. Sex without *US* becomes oppressive, abusive, and potentially criminal. Even in the normal adult fun of sexual seduction, if there is no *US* there will be a *NO*. If we interact with animals without *US*, there will always be a *NO* to human domination. All life forms on earth and even the earth itself know how to express *NO* in their own ways. If we would only listen!

This is what *NO* is all about. The coaching context of results in our daily interactions at home and work is important to continue. But there is also something important beyond it. The freedom to say *NO* can only be lived with another – when an *US* is already there. When there is slavery, servitude, domination, and a lack of freedom to say *NO*, then there is the denial of the *US* that is always there.

Proposing *US* is not an innovative theory, new abstraction, or transformational distinction.

US is. *US* is concealed behind the *SELF*. It is not a pipe dream or fantasy -- *WE* are.



Alexander has been consulting across three continents since 1977. His firm, the Institute for the Practice of Ontology (IPO), now provides Coach Certification programs in the business world (organizational, project management, and executive coaching) and in personal life empowerment (life, relationship, and parent coaching). A licensed Marriage & Family therapist, Alexander is also a globally recognized expert in Risk Management, Crowd Management, Project Management and Special Event Planning. Currently his time is significantly divided between Northern New Mexico, Milan Italy, and multiple venues in South America.