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# The Coach as Philosopher: Perspectives on a Philosophically-Based Process Of Organizational Coaching

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*Coaching is a commitment to identifying plans and strategies designed to achieve specific goals, whether the one being coached is a football team, a corporate executive or a small business organization. And, as every good coach knows, action is only productive when two other elements precede it: (1) Having a clear perception of the nature of the issues, and (2) Adequate assessment of the variables to be taken into account in designing the strategies.*

*Simply put, good coaching must involve: (1) Looking, i.e., what is the nature of the situation (2) Analyzing, i.e., why is the situation what it is? (3) Acting, i.e., how can the situation be effected in the desired way? Although coaching has established itself as a distinct profession, its theories and methods overlap with many other disciplines. The view put forth here by a philosopher/psychologist is that organizational coaching is enriched, not diminished, by inviting input from other disciplines – and philosophy in particular.*

General building contractors are not themselves always expert brick layers or electricians, nor do they need to be. However, even when they hire skilled labor, these contractors must have a certain level of familiarity with those tasks. In a similar manner, the coach's strong suit is in facilitating the implementation of plans, i.e., designing strategies. This is the very heart of the coaching profession. What situates it uniquely among the professions is that it helps clients move their agendas forward successfully. Some of the most common terms within coaching are: motivation, moving forward, progress, success, results, managing, organizing, accomplishment. Given the three dimensions of "looking," "analyzing," and "acting," we often find that those engaged in the organizational coaching enterprise place primary emphasis on action.

What about the other two contributions to the coaching process? How important are they in terms of their effects on action? How can a coach develop competencies in "looking" and "analyzing" – given that a good coach needs to see the situation clearly and evaluate what the issues and problems are before action can be employed productively? Can coaches enhance those functions by visiting other disciplines?

Like teenagers who struggle to identify their own way of doing things, coaches may be reluctant to reach out to other disciplines for fear that it would threaten their professional standing. However, many organizational coaches have reached a level of security with regard to their work whereby cross-fertilization with other disci-

plines is not experienced as a weakening but rather as a strengthening process.

## Separation vs. Divorce

A doctor in a cartoon tells his patient sitting on the examining table, "I'll have to refer you – I only treat left arms." We have all experienced a call made to a business, only to find out that whomever we speak with knows only a part of what we need to know in order to resolve the issue we called about. Even this failed process occurs only after we have encountered a disturbing fact: none of the automated choices we are given relate to the nature of our concern. Rarely can we order anything that is not on the menu. There seems to be fewer and fewer single sources that have all the information necessary to complete a transaction. When was the last time you called a department store to order a gift and ended up being transferred several times because no one person could check the availability, confirm the price, know the shipping charges, handle the gift note, process the payment, know the estimated time of arrival... I can understand if they do not know the score of last night's baseball game but...

In *The Marriage between Sense and Soul*, author and philosopher, Ken Wilbur writes about the important process of differentiation, which occurred among the disciplines in the modern era.<sup>1</sup> Art, for example, broke free from the constraints of religion. Artists were now free to paint something other than Madonna and Child. Wilbur points out, however, that the freedom of

differentiation has evolved into a state of dissociation. The disciplines have gone so far away from their earlier ties with other disciplines that the interdisciplinary fertilization has fallen away. When bringing up the work of Bellah, Garfinkel, Gouldner, Goffman or Berger to an organizational coach (or psychotherapist), one is met usually with a blank stare. And what of Kierkegaard, William James or Spinoza? Even within a discipline, as illustrated by the “left arm specialist” in the cartoon, a Cartesian scholar may know little about Schopenhauer. Wilbur asserts, “If differentiation was the dignity of modernity, dissociation was the disaster.”

The “treatment” for this dissociative condition is not to attack or eliminate differentiation, but rather to rebuild communication among the disciplines. That rebuilding is based on more than the obvious practical benefits for all disciplines. Rebuilding is a basic requirement of any postmodern philosophy – which is, in turn, fundamental to the way in which we see ourselves and is a vehicle for us to find ourselves. Without legitimizing universal principles, truth is identified as nothing more (or less) than a product of social interaction. Complete dissociation is a solipsistic, closed system. All claims to truth become arbitrary and sterile. Any claim to truth in a postmodern world does not resonate with (nor find confirmation in) anything outside itself. Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* never experiences a real self because he sees himself complete in himself.

A living cell has a semi-permeable membrane, which gives it boundaries without being shut out from the flow of intercellular fluids. These fluids are necessary for its vitality. If the cell had no membrane, its identity would be lost; however, if the membrane were impermeable it would die from a lack of an exchange between the intracellular and the extracellular. This is the case as well with individual human beings, social organizations, and academic disciplines. I would like to briefly discuss three disciplines that must face this differentiation/dissociation dilemma: Philosophical Counseling (PC), Philosophical Coaching (PCo) and Psychotherapy (PT). My discussion of these three disciplines is based on the assumption that the sterility of solipsistic dissociation is to be avoided, while the potency of differentiation is to be preserved.

### **What is Philosophy?**

*Philosophy is a sophisticated man’s way of recovering his naiveté.*

Charles Frankel

*All definite knowledge...belongs to science; all dogma as to what surpasses definite knowledge belongs to theology. But between theo-*

*logy and science there is a No Man’s Land, exposed to attack from both sides; this No Man’s Land is philosophy.*

Bertrand Russell

Philosophy is the only discipline that admits its defeat first and then proceeds. That is, the goal of philosophy is to be presuppositionless – an impossibility it acknowledges. Everything that is asserted rests on stipulation and assumption, no matter how fundamental. Philosophy is life’s most profound “tragic hero,” confronting its fate (the impossibility of presupposition) and philosophizing anyway. And, in doing so, it becomes greater than its fate – greater in the sense that its virtues of courage and good faith outshine its destiny. To be a philosopher is to devote oneself to the virtue of “good faith” – to loving truth above oneself. Philosophy’s tragic circumstance and resolution is its own “standard of practice” – its greatest and most enduring legacy.

Like Sisyphus, philosophy is condemned to achieve and relinquish, build and destroy, assert and deny. Such is the fate of philosophy. Sisyphus, a philosopher, moves his “rock” with a slight smile on his face, as Camus speculates.<sup>2</sup> Why does he smile? Because he can. For he is still free, within his fate, to give it his own meaning. Freedom is what makes Sisyphus, the philosopher, greater than fate. Yet there is no experience of freedom without fate.

Being a tragic hero is not some rare being or rare moment. A tragic hero is simply being fully human, defined as acts of integrity – acting in accord with one’s values in the face of difficulty. For it is only when we exercise courage in confronting that which negates us, as philosopher and theological Paul Tillich says, that one experiences an affirmation of the self and simultaneously, an affirmation of humanity.<sup>3</sup>

The opportunity for all of us to be fully human is because of the universality of death. A denial of death is therefore a denial of our humanity and of a real self. Acceptance of fate, of limits, of destiny, of death is not a pitch for passivity. Quite the contrary – if one is to value life. Philosophy, above all, teaches us not to escape fate but to finesse it into a life worth living.

### **Philosophical Counseling (PC)**

When the Delphi Oracle advised, “Know Thyself,” it was as much a directive to know humanity as it was to know oneself as an individual. One does not ordinarily go to an organizational coach (or psychotherapist) in order to explore the truth about humanity, but rather to understand and to know oneself as a unique being. Indeed, the more superficial organizational coaching

and psychotherapies simply want to help clients change their thinking or acting – with little attention to self-understanding.

So, what relevance does philosophy have to an emotionally suffering or organizationally-challenged client? It would be a rather hard sell to say “Know thyself” to a distressed or weeping client who has just had to fire someone about whom she cares deeply or has just been fired herself. Why would she ever want to reflect on the nature of the human condition. Yet, her presenting issue is one that exists always within numerous assumptions, both psychological and philosophical. Psychologically, her pain may be influenced by a history in which her father was never able to sustain a deep, meaningful friendship or never was able to hold down a job. Philosophically, she may believe that everything happens for the best. This philosophical stance is adopted as a means for reducing her own suffering.

Today there are two fundamental ways of doing PC. One adopts the idea that helping the client construct a viable “worldview assumption” to guide his day-to-day life gives a secure context within which various problems can be successfully confronted. A second approach argues that a worldview assumption may be a by-product, while the major focus of PC is to help the client think critically and creatively.

Some Philosophical Counselors focus on a particular philosophical school or individual philosopher in their work, while others only occasionally refer to specific philosophical ideas. The latter are more interested in the *act* of philosophizing: “It’s the dialogue, stupid! [It’s not the theory or the methods that makes PC valuable, but the dialogue itself]”.

Regardless of the wide variations in theory and practice within the fields of organizational coaching and psychotherapy, the near universal assumption in both fields is that philosophical counseling and psychotherapeutic processes are provided to help improve performance in life (or work) and alleviate emotional suffering. While it is the case that many PCs also share this assumption, it is not universally so. If performance is improved and suffering is diminished or eliminated in the process of doing philosophy, so be it. But these are mostly pleasant side effects of the higher purpose of pursuing truth and understanding.

Philosophy and PC practitioners believe that before one can go off looking for explanation and for causes and effects and the like, there needs to be a greater understanding about the “what” of things. PC thinks it’s premature to try and help a client improve their

performance before exploring the concept of “improvement” (or even of “performance”) – just as the PC thinks it’s premature to help a client understand why she does not have a loving relationship before exploring the concept of love itself with her. The following hypothetical dialogue between Socrates and Scientificus illustrates this point.

### **Socrates and Scientificus: A Dialogue**

Socrates is walking down a path on the outskirts of Athens. A man sitting under a nearby tree calls out to him.

**Scientificus:** Socrates! Socrates!

**Socrates:** Scientificus, my friend. How good it is to see you after a long time. It is also my good fortune because I have been puzzled over something for a great while and I knew that you would be able to help me. What luck to run into you.

**Scientificus:** My dear friend, Socrates, you are thought to be the wisest of men, how do you think I could help you?

**Socrates:** I can assure you that the opposite is true. I am the owner of such little truth that it makes such rumors pure fantasy. My only hope of knowing anything comes from teachers like you, dear Scientificus.

**Scientificus:** Tell me, my clever if not truly wise friend, what has been puzzling you?

**Socrates:** You are so kind to offer your time and I do not think it will take you long to enlighten me. Forgive me for asking what must be a very simple question. I cannot understand what anxiety is.

**Scientificus:** (Laughing) It is actually very simple indeed, Socrates. You see anxiety is when someone experiences a rapid heart beat, perspiration all over their body, shallow breathing, warm feeling in the body but cold hands, lightheadedness and the like.

**Socrates:** These experiences must be very unpleasant but forgive my ignorance, but are those bodily sensations symptoms of anxiety?

**Scientificus:** (chuckling slightly) Yes, they are symptoms of anxiety.

**Socrates:** Alas, wise Scientificus, I am still puzzled as to what anxiety itself is that produces the symptoms you speak of.

**Scientificus:** Of course. I will give you the answer you seek. These symptoms of anxiety are caused by chemical

imbalances in the brain.

**Socrates:** Ah, so there is a cause for these dreadful symptoms of anxiety?

**Scientificus:** Yes, clearly.

**Socrates:** I am no student of medicine dear Scientificus. Can you tell me what chemicals are out of balance?

**Scientificus:** Certainly. We know that when we give Tincture La Ba Ba to an anxious person they feel much less anxiety.

**Socrates:** So, Tincture La Ba Ba balances these chemicals that are imbalanced?

**Scientificus:** Yes, Socrates, this is so. Now you must understand anxiety.

**Socrates:** Almost, dear friend. Forgive me for such an embarrassing lack of knowledge, but what chemicals are out of balance?

**Scientificus:** Certainly. We know that when we give Tincture La Ba Ba to an anxious person they feel much less anxiety.

**Socrates:** So, Tincture La Ba Ba balances these chemicals that are imbalanced?

**Scientificus:** Yes, Socrates, this is so. Now you must understand anxiety.

**Socrates:** Almost, dear friend. Forgive me for such an embarrassing lack of knowledge, but what chemicals are out of balance?

**Scientificus:** We suspect the Romulus and Remus chemicals are involved.

**Socrates:** This is speculation?

**Scientificus:** Yes, speculation.

**Socrates:** You are so patient with me in my ignorance about this subject of anxiety. I understand that you know the symptoms of anxiety and you know the probable cause of anxiety, but I am unable to understand, from that, what anxiety itself is. Is it true, wise Scientificus, that there is something called anxiety that is both caused and has symptoms?

**Scientificus:** Of course.

**Socrates:** Oh please, my learned friend, I would like very much to know, then, what anxiety is? Please do

now set my mind at ease about this troubling puzzle.

**Scientificus:** (looking up at the sun) Look how late it is? Socrates, do forgive me but I must continue our discussion another time. I fear I may be late for an appointment.

**Socrates:** Do not apologize, dear and wise friend. I am comforted by knowing that you will tell me next time we meet what anxiety is, for surely you, of all others, know it. [To himself: "Scientificus seemed 'anxious' to leave."]

### **Integrating Organizational Coaching And Philosophical Inquiry**

Organizational coaching helps the client to find success, work-life balance and perhaps even happiness; philosophy invites the client to reflect on the concept of success or balance or happiness itself. Philosophical Counseling asks, "What does it mean to feel worthwhile?" while organizational coaches ask, "How do we create the setting or how do you gain the skill-set needed to feel worthwhile in this organization?" We focus, like Scientificus, on causes and remedies rather than seeking to understand the essence of the issue we are addressing.

Two vital elements that address the human condition are, by and large, missing in organizational coaching (and psychotherapy) today:

1. Attention to clients' deeply held ontological and epistemological assumptions.
2. Seeing clients in the context of their social, political, economic, cultural, and spiritual world.

The first has to do with the "Philosophies of Life" or "Worldview Assumptions" that serve as a "tune" or theme in the structure of one's life, and as a reference with regard to addressing life issues. The second is an issue of "decontextualization," i.e., seeing the client's challenge as an internal process in terms of both its origin and its successful resolution. By contrast, Fritjof Capra, in *The Turning Point*, speaks of a tribe in Zaire, Africa that brings the mentally and emotionally suffering tribe member before the whole tribe and asks, "What is wrong with us that this individual has this problem?"<sup>4</sup> Organizational coaches (and even more often psychotherapists) often act as though shutting the door leaves the external world outside the issues that are addressed in the coaching session.

If a client comes to an organizational coaching session with concerns about feelings of frustration or rage regarding a fellow employee, the coach may work up a performance plan for the client that will enhance the client's capacity to confront the fellow employee in a controlled and effective manner. By contrast, if the

philosophical counselor had an interpretation similar to that of author Christopher Lasch, that we live in a narcissistic culture, then the client's rage may be seen as a symptom of a pervasive individualism and lack of emotional control in the client's organization.<sup>5</sup> No less so does the philosophical coach—be this person philosophically inclined or otherwise—need to be aware of the social, political and economic assumptions that are embedded in our society when addressing client problems, concerns, and goals.

## Summary

One way to distinguish philosophical counseling (PC), philosophical coaching (PCo), and psychotherapy (PT) is the following:

PC – Looking

PT – Analyzing

PCo – Doing

Even in this most simplistic reference, one can see how each is incomplete by itself. Human experience involves seeing, reflecting and acting. Philosophy's attention to the "what" of experience, psychotherapy's interest in the "why" of experience, and the organizational coach's focus on the "how" of experience each in itself is incomplete. This does not mean that they should merge into some indistinguishable mush. Instead, each should incorporate elements outside its central interest in the service of that interest. One does not need to strive to be a "philo-psycho-coach." Rather, one can strive to be an organizational coach with sensibilities regarding the "what" and "why" of total human experience. One does not need to be only a "doctor of the left arm," when the right arm requires attention.

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Dr. McCullough is a licensed psychotherapist in private practice in San Francisco, CA. He is co-author of the APA award winning book, *Managing Your Anxiety*, as well as author of *Outgrowing Agoraphobia*, *Always at Ease*, *Nobody's Victim*, *Coping* (video for teens) and *How to Manage Your Fears and Phobias* (audio tape). Dr. McCullough is a Certified Clinical Philosopher and also certified as a Philosophical Counselor by the American Philosophical Practitioners Association. McCullough has hosted a biweekly Philosopher's Cafe at Barnes & Noble in San Francisco, CA., and is a co-founder of the William James Graduate Institute. He has been interviewed extensively by the media during his long career (Wall Street Journal, Esquire Magazine, Oprah Winfrey, CNN, Prevention Magazine, Regis Philbin, Attitudes Television, Sally Jesse Rafael.)

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Ken Wilbur. *The Marriage Between Sense and Soul*. New York: Random House, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Albert Camus. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. New York: Knopf, 1955.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Tillich. *The Courage to Be*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952.

<sup>4</sup> Fritjof Capra. *The Turning Point*. New York: Bantam, 1983.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Lasch. *The Culture of Narcissism*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1979.

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