A Philosophy of Coaching
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Twenty five hundred years of western philosophical thought is being challenged by emerging discoveries in the cognitive sciences. This article will focus on the three major discoveries that are creating a quantum shift in our understanding of human reasoning: 1. The mind is inherently embodied so our reasoning is limited by our bodily experience. 2. Thought is mostly unconscious and we can never become aware of our thinking in its totality. 3. Abstract concepts are largely metaphorical even though we may believe that we can think literally.

INTRODUCTION

“From the Pre-Socratics, Western philosophical thought has, in one way or another, contained the idea that there exists a universal, transcendent, disembodied wisdom that is separate from our minds” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Further, that our minds should seek to tap into it. And finally, that our brain functions as a sort of wet machine for processing this wisdom. From here, it’s a minor leap to prescribing right thinking as though it is a function of the universe. And of course, the projection of my traditions onto this universal transcendent reasoning makes me right and you wrong.

“But modern empirical methods are yielding new discoveries. In fact, these methods are showing us that the human mind is really an epiphenomenon of the totality of human processes” (Pinker, 2002). This means that the human mind is embodied. And given this finding, it follows that reasoning is also embodied and limited to what the human mind can comprehend and produce.

THE END OF CARTESIAN DUALISM

These findings signal the end of a priori philosophical speculation and move our inquiry into the realm of empirical study. And this is important because first, “our most basic philosophical beliefs are tied inextricably to our view of reason.” (Pinker, 2002) Second, we once considered our reasoning faculty to be a function separate from our bodies. It is now considered to be embodied in the human neural system. If our view of human reason is incorrect, how can our coaching be effective given that human reasoning is our central focus?

There is one caveat here. The absence of a universal transcendent reasoning does not mean that there is an absence of universal normalcy in human reasoning. Our species has evolved a
common way of reasoning even though the content and priorities are culture specific. And as many of us know there are those who demonstrate what we call common sense and those who don’t. One could say that there are principles of normal reasoning that can be used as guidelines in our coaching processes.

The key to effective coaching is that “there is no Cartesian dualistic person, sharing exactly the same disembodied, transcendent reason with everyone else and capable of knowing everything about his or her mind simply by self reflection” (Pinker, 2002) In other words, we cannot, through “introspection alone, discover everything there is to know about our minds and the nature of our experience” (Pinker, 2002). But we can, with the assistance of another, take on the challenge of empirical exploration in the service of discovering new and different ways of being that can give us new options beyond our perceived and biological limitations.

It is important for us to know and remember as coaches, that reason is not disembodied but arises from the nature of our brains, bodies, and bodily experience. Consequently it is not dispassionate, but is emotionally engaged. It is not purely literal, but largely metaphorical. It is not universal in the transcendent sense; that is, it is not part of the universe. But reason is universal in that it is a capacity shared by all human beings. And it is in this shared human condition that we possess the ability to coach others.

In summary, our minds are embodied. This means that our reasoning is limited by our bodily experiences, which means that each of us lives alone in our own world, connected by our universal capacity for reasoning, being affected by our emotions, unable to fully understand ourselves by introspection, thinking in metaphorical terms, most of which happens at an unconscious level. Is it possible to come up with a better set of reasons for coaching?

Why should coaches be interested?
If our philosophical thinking is now being challenged by discoveries in the cognitive sciences, then we must challenge that which derives from it. Coaching derives from western philosophical thought, specifically with regard to the process of human reasoning, as we have seen.

We might say that the cognitive sciences are defining a new human ontology. As we begin to understand being human anew, it would seem well-advised to re-think our approaches to coaching; both our goals and our methods. While this article deals mainly with a review of methods, I believe that a review of our coaching goals is as important. Here, too, coaching goals
are connected both to the individual and to the organization in which we work and perform. A new human ontology automatically produces a need for a new organizational ontology.

With a shifting and new understanding of what it means to be human comes a need to re-examine our presuppositions about ourselves, our organizations and our world. In a sense, we humans have created it all. Do we continue to coach to obsolete goals with new methods? Or should one of our goals be to raise the level of consciousness in a world riven by economic disparity, social injustices and ecologically unsustainable use of our planet’s resources?

**THE EMBODIED MIND**

The human mind can be understood as an emergent quality that arises from our bodily functions. In being so, our mind limits experience to that which each unique body can sense. In this way, “all cognitive experience involves the knower in a personal way, rooted in his biological structure. There, his experience of certainty is an individual phenomenon. He is blind to the cognitive acts of others, in a solitude which, we shall see, is transcended only in a world created with those others (Maturana & Varela, 1987). So we are not alone. “In other words, we all live in a state of subjective blindness and the only way to bridge over to a richer understanding of our world is to have contact with other people” (DeFilippis, 2003).

An unavoidable truth is that you must have at least a practical understanding of how human reasoning is shaped by our subjective blindness and how historical and social assumptions shape your own thinking and that of your clients. Only then can you can reach your optimum capacity to assist your clients. The reason is that as coaches we are tasked to work with unique human beings who are each different and yet in many ways are exactly like everyone else. What makes them different from each other is contained in their unique physiological make up and their individual world of social and historical structures.

Given that our mind is embodied, what is the nature of our subjective experience? We know that our bodies can hear, smell, taste, feel and see the external world through the operations of our central nervous system. But do we know that we operate on metaphorical representations of objective reality imprinted into our neural system?

The attributes we ascribe to the external world exist in our central nervous systems. For instance, our logic exists in our physiology and not in the universe. It is a function of how we internally organize the external world. So when we experience a natural external event “that doesn’t make sense”, we are probably right.
according to our common sense. But the universe doesn’t necessarily share our logic. So the only place it doesn’t make sense is in our experience.

Our central nervous systems have evolved over time to provide the information needed for our species to survive in our environment. In doing so, our species has developed predetermined reasoning categories. These are what Steven Pinker (2002) calls “universal cognitive capabilities”. These categories exist in us, not in the universe. The universe is a far richer place than we can know. But we have been equipped with only those capabilities that provided for our adaptive advantage.

Each of us has a unique neural structure even though we share a common species physiology. Not only do our species adaptations limit our experience of the external world, but that experience is shaped by our own version of human physiology. The sum of these two facts results in what Einstein called the “optical delusion of consciousness”.

The passage below about the illusion of the separate self, adapted from Albert Einstein’s personal note to a Rabbi, offers an elegant description of the subjective blindness of human experience. For our purposes, it is a good start on exploring one aspect of the ontology of being human.

I am a part of the whole called the universe. I am a single point of view in time and space. I experience myself, my thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of my consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for me. My task is to free myself from this prison by widening my circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature and its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely. My striving for such an achievement is a part of the liberation of my self – a foundation for my inner security. I pray for the wisdom and awareness to help with this lifelong challenge (Allen, 1989).

In order to maintain the integrity of our point of view we have evolved into thinking and feeling as though we are somehow separated from everything around us. Rather, we are integrated into our surroundings. We long for individuality and strain for companionship. We are, at the same time, private and social beings forever in that tension.

But if we could somehow achieve what Einstein thought that nobody could achieve completely, what effect might it have on our experience of other people? If there were no perceived separation between us and the rest of the universe, except to see it from a unique perspective, wouldn’t we want to know and acknowledge everyone else’s point of view? What better way to
understand the complexities of this incomprehensible place? What better reason to respect every living thing? What better call to coaching?

**EGO**

One of the obstacles to seeing our connectedness is that of our ego. We are limited to our own perceptions as determined by our unique physiologies. Given that each of us has a one-of-a-kind physiology allowing unique perceptions, we are led to believe that we are separate and our perceptions are the correct ones. This is our ego at work.

The greater the commitment to this belief on the part of the client, the greater the resistance to coaching. The greater the commitment to this belief on the part of the coach, the greater the potential for failure. Neither the coach nor the client is separate or has access to the only valid perceptions, even though their egos may have convinced them otherwise.

Upon reflection, most thoughtful people know this. So why do we still cling to the correctness of our views with a death grip? Because the loss of our strongly held positions feels like “disintegration.” And it is – the disintegration of our historical point of view. That’s tantamount to the death of our ego. That is not an easy thing for the ego to tolerate. Remember, its main task is to keep itself intact.

The only way to overcome the limitations of the ego is to allow another person’s point of view. No client will ever gain much of lasting value as long as she is stuck operating at the level of ego.

Herein is a route to excellent coaching. You must demonstrate how to allow another’s point of view without disintegrating yourself. You have a unique point of view. It is a valid view and added to your client’s view, new worlds can evolve. As the philosopher Jurgen Habermas (1970) said, “Concerning enlightenment, there are only participants.” This can only happen when we are “egoless” with our clients. This is precisely why following a model too strictly can create the impression that you know more than your client and lead to failed coaching relationships. There is no all-encompassing, pre-determined model for coaching the complexities of human beings. As a coach, you are the tool – your client is your partner – the relationship is a privileged place.

So to conclude this point, the proper positioning of a coach is as a participant in a mutual awakening to new perspectives. And in doing so, enlighten our clients and enlighten ourselves. When we do this we become more effective coaches, to the benefit of our future clients.
COGNITIVE UNCONSCIOUS

The list of cognitive functions that we perform just in having a simple conversation is too large to list completely in this short article. These functions are being performed automatically, without our conscious awareness. Among other things, we are interpreting sounds into words, words into meanings, meanings into responses, responses into choosing voice levels, into speaking them, and listening to the other person’s next comment while we are readying ourselves to respond to that comment. All of this occurs while noting our emotional responses and determining if they are appropriate for this conversation. And all of this is happening without our conscious awareness. Some of these functions can be identified and examined consciously after the fact. But to do so while we are functioning in real time is just not possible. Yet this is where we operate during most of our waking hours. This unconscious process is the foundation of our conscious activities.

This vast amount of unconscious processing really makes us who we are. It is the basis of our conscious reasoning. We are at its effect. So is it a waste of time to try to know ourselves better? Of course not. It is just not practical (neither effective nor efficient) to do it alone. Yes, we can learn much about ourselves by self-reflection but we will never know the whole person that we are – even with help. “The cognitive sciences have taught us that reason is embodied and cannot know itself directly” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). What a wonderful opportunity for coaches.

These unconscious functions are the process, but what about the content? The bulk of the content is made up of presuppositions provided by our culture. Our world is filled with so many presuppositions that we can never know them all. These presuppositions are embedded in our culture and given to us as children. As we grow into adulthood, we create our own variety of presuppositions, but even they are shaped by our original beliefs. As Professor Rick Roderick, National University proposes and I paraphrase, “We don’t learn our ethics and morals by reading the classics. We learn them by getting our bottoms spanked by our mothers.”

Even though culture is pervasive, it is transparent. It only becomes apparent through the actions of its members. In fact, as members of a culture, our actions are the way it knows itself. Although we think that we are independent thinkers we are simply each unique perspectives on the common thoughts of our culture. We have our point of view of the larger point of view. In other words, we cannot escape the fact that we are unconsciously influenced by our cultures. Unless, of course, we move to a higher level of consciousness, beyond what Eckardt Tolle (2005) calls the “egoic mind”.


Tolle goes on to say that the egoic mind thrives on the world of structure and form. I add that the egoic mind is the repository of the structure and form called culture. When we operate as ego, we reveal what’s important to us in the world. If we assign considerable value to material rewards we are reflecting a value that has been privileged in our culture. It may seem that cultural values are personal, but they are prescribed for us by our culture. This is where ontology and cosmology merge. This is where rigorous reflection with the aid of a trusted other can show us a path to higher levels of consciousness.

Individuals reflect their cultures in many ways. For example, I’ve had the good fortune to visit many parts of this country. One evening I had dinner in a restaurant in Tennessee where everyone wore Harley Davidson-inspired clothes. Another evening I had dinner in Manhattan and men wore dark suits and ties and woman wore evening gowns. Does anyone think that each of these diners came up with their style of dress by independent thought? Listening in on conversations in both of these settings was very revealing. Even though these folks thought that their thinking was their own, it was simply their individual point of view regarding the local prevailing point of view. What we consider thinking is usually just a rearrangement of our prejudices, and the vast majority of our prejudices are unknown to us. In addition, they are not even consistent. So the idea that we are literal thinkers who have a consistent point of view reflecting some set of absolute values is erroneous. This brings us to the issue of metaphors.

**METAPHORS**

Abstract concepts are largely metaphorical even though we may believe that we can think literally. As we have learned from the cognitive sciences, we come into this world prepared with universal cognitive capabilities. These capabilities are embodied and ready to be developed. They are consequently shaped and limited by our physiology and our culture. Our neural system has evolved to hold metaphoric knowledge because of its physical nature. Our ‘reasoning’ consists of finding and applying these metaphors to each situation, based on our need at that moment. Because this happens for the most part in our cognitive unconscious, we can be very inconsistent and unaware of the process until it reaches our conscious thinking.

Traditional Western philosophy held that the highest level of thinking was our ability to somehow tap into the transcendent wisdom that existed in the universe. There is no transcendent human wisdom available to our embodied minds. All available human wisdom and all human reasoning are embodied in human beings. We are the originators of human wisdom and all available human wisdom and all human reasoning are embodied in human beings.
the mechanism for this embodiment is metaphoric. Metaphors translate our sensory experiences into knowledge of our world in the only way that we can know our world. They are conceptual maps of the world instantiated into our neural connections.

“Before” “you” “jump” to a “conclusion”, does this “position” “mean” that there is “nothing” in the “universe” for us to “learn” “about” and “from”? [All of the quoted words in this sentence are based on metaphors.] Of course not. It means that we can only know it through our senses. There is more going on than we can even imagine because our imagination is limited to our bodily experiences as shaped by and held in our neural systems. As human reasoning evolves, I believe we will gain greater access to what is beyond our comprehension today.

This is important to a coach. Why?
When a client comes to a coach with the need for another point of view on his or her issues, it is good to know that neither the client nor the coach has a conscious grasp of their own reasoning mechanisms. It serves well to remind both parties that the enlightenment process is a participatory process and that neither alone can transcend the limitations of their own embodied reasoning. Together, however, they can begin to catch a glimpse of new opportunities and hopefully develop more effective outcomes in their lives. Yes, this means both the coach and the client.

THE WORLD WE LIVE IN
A major requirement in excellent coaching is to understand the condition of the world within which we live as it changes and reshapes itself. It has tremendous implications for our lives too. Coaches must ask: should the goal of our coaching be to assist our clients to get better at doing just the things that keep them materially successful? To paraphrase the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., should we help produce personal efficiencies that result in “building better and better guided missiles with ever more misguided people”?

As coaches, shouldn’t we be at least familiar with the presuppositions that create the world that honors guided missiles and destroys the people who build them? Shouldn’t we then do a values check to be sure that we’re not adding to the mayhem?

I will leave the topic of unsustainable conditions of the world to others. But suffice to say, for my purposes, the implications of our culture’s embedded presuppositions on individual behavior have to be a major consideration for all coaches. As coaches we need to be prepared to explore those presuppositions openly. If you don’t know what’s shaping you, how can you keep it separate from the work you do with your client?
Finally, I do not claim that the universe has nothing to offer us. I am saying that our limitations are embodied. The human evolutionary process has provided approximately fifteen universal cognitive capabilities (Pinker, 2002). It has done so to our adaptive advantage. What we have done in return is to create an understanding of the universe in our own image. So our projection of a universal transcendent reason is of human origins. The truth lies somewhere between our human projections and what really exists. I don’t think anyone knows. The question is: will we continue to evolve or are we completed? If we are, we have a great deal of work to do just to raise our level of consciousness enough to see what we doing to ourselves and all of the other species that share our planet. If not, I wish I could see the future.

REFERENCES


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