

Ontology:
A Theoretical Basis for
Professional Coaching

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Abstract

If coaching is to gain credibility as a profession, it is essential that coaching practice be informed by rigorous and substantive theory. The discipline of Ontology, which has emerged from the integration of significant 20th century developments in the biology of cognition, existential philosophy, and the philosophy of language, provides a sound and substantive theoretical basis for professional coaching. The theory and methodology of Ontological Coaching enables a coach to observe and work constructively with three essential domains of human existence - language, emotions and body – as a means for supporting coaching clients to develop important new perspectives that generate more effective behaviours.

Theory and professional coaching

According to an ancient Chinese expression, “Theory without practice is foolish; practice without theory is dangerous”.

One of the key features of a profession is that the work of its practitioners is based on a coherent methodology that is grounded in an established and accepted body of knowledge.¹ If coaching is to move from being an industry to become a profession, the training and accreditation of coaches must

include a substantive, robust and accessible theoretical component, which clearly informs the method and practice of coaching.

Ontology provides a rigorous and substantive theoretical framework for the development of professional coaches. Ontology is the study of being. According to *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, “Ontology is ... the science of being in general, embracing such issues as the nature of existence and the ... structure of reality.”² Major developments in biology and philosophy in the 20th century have resulted in Ontology providing a deeply grounded view of human life, which is the basis of a specific approach to coaching, called Ontological Coaching.

According to psychologist Suzanne Skiffington, “existential issues, such as identifying purpose and meaning in life, alleviating suffering and enabling the individual to live a more fulfilled and joyful life, are central to the coaching process.”³ From an ontological perspective, coaches observe and work with key aspects of how clients (coachees) have structured their reality and the nature of their existence, ie, their perceptions and ways of participating in life. This is done by observing key aspects of their being, or more precisely their *Way of Being*. As a skilful practitioner, an ontological coach is able to:

- (i) develop a sound understanding of what aspects of the coachee’s Way of Being are generating an unhelpful reality, and
- (ii) support the coachee to develop a more constructive reality that will lead to positive changes in his or her world.

A new discipline for coaching

Ontology dates back as far as the philosophers of Ancient Greece. However, it was major developments in the 20th century in philosophy and biology, as well as anthropology, sociology and quantum physics, which provided the rigorous academic underpinning for the development of Ontology as a discipline for professional coaching.

Significant developments in *the biology of cognition*, *existential philosophy* and *the philosophy of language*, have generated a new understanding of human beings and human interaction, including the nature of human perception, communication and behaviour. These developments have been integrated to form a new field of knowledge, called “Ontology of the Human Observer”, as a discipline for professional coaching.

Fernando Flores is the key figure in the formation of the discipline. He completed a multi-disciplinary doctoral thesis, entitled *Management and Communication in the Office of the Future*, at the Berkeley campus of the University of California.

Flores was greatly influenced by the novel, yet biologically grounded, ideas of Humberto Maturana on perception, cognition, language and communication. These conversations were a key inspiration for his research, in which he particularly focused on the existential philosophy of Martin Heidegger⁴ and John Searle's Theory of Speech Acts.⁵ Flores was able to integrate the ideas of Maturana, Heidegger and Searle to produce a new understanding of language and communication, which eventually became a discipline for professional coaching.⁶

The biology of cognition

Humberto Maturana's research on the nature of perception provides the biological grounding for Ontological Coaching. His research findings in the neurophysiology of vision led him to question the commonsense understanding of perception (apprehending and representing the objectivity reality of the world), which, in turn, resulted in the development of a theory of living systems, language and cognition.⁷ Some of the fundamental concepts in his theory are: the observer, nervous system, structural determinism, perturb, structural coupling, cognition, distinctions, consensual domains, languaging and emotioning.

A key aspect of Maturana's theory is the notion of "The Observer". What is observed depends on the observer.⁸ According to Maturana, the world any of us knows as an observer depends on the interactions between the neurons of our nervous system. Put in another way, it is the structure of our nervous system that primarily determines at any point in time what is reality for us (individually and collectively). Maturana argued that perception must be studied from the inside, rather than the outside, for the nervous system generates the phenomena that become apparent and have existence for The Observer.

Humans, and other living systems, can be regarded as "structurally-determined systems", with the structure of our nervous system informing us how to observe and respond the world (which includes not just the physical world, but also the world of abstraction, and in particular the world of possibility). Events and circumstances do not specify how an organism will respond. For Maturana, events and circumstances that are spatially separate from an organism perturb its nervous system. However, it is not the external

circumstances that primarily determine the response of the organism. Rather, it is the structure of the organism's nervous system that primarily determines its response.

Maturana emphasises that the notion of structural determinism does not mean a fixed and unchanging nervous system; the nervous system has plasticity. Living systems are continually learning, adapting and changing as new neuronal connections develop, changing the structure of the nervous system and enabling different ways of observing and behaving to be possible.

A vital part of the process of adaptation and survival of living systems is interaction with their environment (medium), which includes other living systems. Through their continual interaction, living systems continually perturb each others' nervous systems, a process Maturana refers to as "structural coupling". Living systems exist in mutual influence with their environment, in which the structure of their nervous systems is continually perturbed and altered to shift how they are as observers. For Maturana, cognition is framed in terms of actions and interactions, and cognition is integral to the process of observing and living. "Living systems are cognitive systems, and living, as a process is a process of cognition."⁹

The relevance of these key ideas to Ontological Coaching is that the client (coachee) is limited by how they are observing their world, and that problems, possibilities and solutions exist in the "eye of the beholder". The essential role of the coach is to provide a safe context for the coachee to learn new distinctions that expand how they are observing, enabling them to become a different and more powerful observer (with power being interpreted as the capacity to take effective action).

Maturana's view of language is based on the notion of "consensual domains", in which observers share distinctions about observing the world, and these are distinctions that occur in language. As a consensual domain of human activity, language allows features of the world to be distinguished, and for the development of shared understanding. This is the essential basis for the development cooperation, collaboration and coordination, which are essential in constructive personal and professional relationships.

In addition to language being a vital feature of the structure of the human nervous system, shaping how people observe the world of actuality and possibility, Maturana also emphasised the role of emotions and physiology. He coined the expressions "languaging" and "emotioning" to indicate that language and emotions are processes of living, which are integral features of

perception and cognition.¹⁰ He characterised emotions as dynamic body dispositions and as relational behaviour.

Maturana's views on language, emotions and physiology provide the basis for the essential model and methodology of Ontological Coaching. The structure of the human nervous system is regarded as a dynamic interaction between three interrelated spheres of human existence – language, emotions and body. In Ontological Coaching the inextricable interrelationship between these three ontological domains is regarded as way of being, shaping how the world is observed. Each domain is an area of learning and change, with shifts in all three areas being required to shift for lasting change in to occur.

The application of the trilogy of language, emotions and body in coaching is that the coach is an acute observer of how (i) the coachee uses language, (ii) the emotional experience of the coachee, and (iii) how the particular ways of languaging and emotioning are configured in the coachee's body. The role of the coach is to respectfully inquire with the coachee about how shifts can occur in each domain of language, emotions and body, to generate constructive new perspectives that open new possibilities for effective action by the coachee. (See example below, "Ontological Coaching in action".)

Philosophy and the linguistic turn

There is a remarkable overlap between Maturana's biologically-based theory, and a major development that occurred in philosophy during the 20th century. This development has been characterised as "the linguistic turn", its essence being that for humans language does much more than describe the world. Language can be seen as an active process that generates what constitutes reality for humans, and when change occurs in the use of language, a different world becomes available to the observer. It is interesting to note that the emergence of the perspective that language plays an active role in the construction of reality was not limited to philosophy. It is also evident in the work of social psychologist George Herbert Mead,¹¹ some anthropologists,¹² Alfred Korzybski's work on General Semantics,¹³ Albert Ellis's Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy,¹⁴ as well as scholars of the sociology of knowledge.¹⁵

Different branches of philosophy contributed to this new understanding of language. From Phenomenology and Hermeneutics came the idea that thinking, understanding and acting are acts of interpretation, placing interpretation at the heart of cognition. To participate and interact with the

world is continually a process of interpretation, occurring in a cultural and historical context, which is essentially a process of generating meaning. As philosopher Ken Wilber has commented, “Humans seemed condemned to meaning, condemned to find value, depth, care, concern, worth, significance to their everyday existence.”¹⁶ All of this occurs in language. In short, interpretation is fundamental to human existence, and this is fundamentally linguistic, as well as being emotional and physiological.

One of the essential roles of an ontological coach is to support the development of constructive change in the coachee’s interpretations, for existing interpretations have generated a meaning about the world that is restrictive and acts like a prison, limiting their possibilities or potential.

Martin Heidegger was a major contributor to the linguistic turn. He undertook a major inquiry into the question of being.¹⁷ Writing in German, he used the expression “Dasein”, which means “Being-in-the world”. For Heidegger, human understanding and existence was a lived practical existence. Understanding arose from how people engaged in life, which especially includes the social and conversational practices of their communities. Living is an interpretive experience, with the habits, customs, beliefs and rituals that form an integral feature of our daily individual and collective existence, informing us how to engage with and participate in the world. This inescapably involves language. Heidegger characterised language as “the house of being” and stated that for humans there is no way out of language. Who we are and who we become, individually and collectively, is constituted in language.

Other significant contributions in the linguistic turn were from Ludwig Wittgenstein, John Austin and John Searle.¹⁸ The essential ideas that emerged were that:

- (i) language is a form of human action;
- (ii) language is an instrument for getting things done;
- (iii) language produces effects on participants (interlocutors) and therefore impacts on what is reality for them;
- (iv) there are a number of fundamental ways that humans continually use language to produce effects and generate reality, which are referred to as Speech Acts.

The idea that language generates reality is central to Ontological Coaching. The notion of Speech Acts was developed into a model of Basic Linguistic Acts, and is an important aspect of the methodology of Ontological Coaching.¹⁹ The coach listens to particular ways the coachee is both using and not using language, and how these may be limiting how he

or she is observing their circumstances. Change in language, especially the use of Basic Linguistic Acts, can be the basis for the development of more effective behaviour and communication, and the resolution of problematic issues.

Philosophical perspectives on emotions

Philosopher Robert Solomon has commented that emotions are “intelligent, cultivated, conceptually rich engagements with the world, not mere reactions or instincts. ... [E]motions are the meaning of life. It is because we are moved, because we feel that life has meaning.”²⁰ Martin Heidegger emphasised the importance of moods in our interpretive existence. “The foundation of any interpretation is an act of understanding, which is always accompanied by a state-of-mind, or, in other words, which has a mood.”²¹

Moods can be deep, invisible and enduring emotional states that have a major impact on how the world is observed and engaged with. For Heidegger moods are a “primordial kind of being”, and regarded moods as a way of attuning ourselves to the world.²² He captures the notion of moods as predispositions for action, when he says they are a “making possible to direct oneself towards something.”²³ Our moods are an expression of our fundamental predispositions and orientations in life. Mood discloses or reveals a particular world, and this especially includes what actions and ways of engaging with the world are and are not possible.

Based on the philosophy of Heidegger and Nietzsche,²⁴ a model called Some Basic Moods of Life has been developed for Ontological Coaching. Working with moods can be essential for generating fundamental shifts in the coachee’s habitual ways of observing and behaving, and the generation of lasting positive change. The model provides the coach with key distinctions to respectfully explore, understand and shift how the coachee is restricted by some fundamental aspects of his or her emotional existence. This includes the crucial importance of subtle yet profound, shifts in the coachee’s static and moving posture.

Philosophical perspectives on emotions have been reinforced by the recent emergence of “Emotional Intelligence”, a concept developed in psychology²⁵ and popularised by Daniel Goleman.²⁶ Within neuroscience there has been an increasing research focus on the impact of emotions on perception and behaviour, and the development of a specialised area called “Affective Brain Science”.²⁷ Until his death in 2001, biologist Francesco

Varela, co-author with Maturana, was active in this area of scientific research.²⁸

Related developments in psychotherapy

Although Ontological Coaching is not psychotherapy, it is worthwhile noting that similar developments in the utilisation of a new understanding of language have occurred in psychotherapy. In *The Interpreted World*, Ernesto Spinelli draws on phenomenology and existential philosophy to present an outline of phenomenological psychology and phenomenological psychotherapy.²⁹ Michael White, the developer of Narrative Therapy, has been prominent in explicitly recognising the role of language in the client's world.³⁰

The biology of cognition has been utilised as a framework for Family Therapy, with articles appearing in *The Networker*,³¹ *The Irish Journal of Psychology*³² and the *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*.³³

,Ontological Coaching in action

Having outlined the essence of Ontology as a theoretical basis for professional coaching, it is now appropriate to move to considering the application of the theory and methodology of Ontological Coaching. What follows is an outline of an actual coaching conversation in an organisational context that demonstrates the application of the methodology of Ontological Coaching.

George was the manager of a business unit in a major international manufacturing company. He had an outstanding background as an engineer and gained rapid promotion to his current position and has strong aspirations of reaching an executive position in the company. Unfortunately though, relationships with many people in his unit had gradually deteriorated. George often found himself snappy and irritable, and even though he did not want to be this way, it was clearly interfering with his effectiveness in his role. He liked the continuing challenge of his work, but unfortunately it had become a major source of suffering, with the erosion of the joy and stimulation he had once experienced. His family life was also suffering, as he carried his negative mood home with him.

George's performance reviews consistently highlighted the need for improvement in his communication with others. Early in the coaching

conversation it was clear George was experiencing a major difficulty with delegation. More specifically, he was experiencing a communication breakdown in *making clear and effective requests* (a key element of the model of Basic Linguistic Acts). Making effective requests is at the heart of how any workplace functions, as people continually make and manage commitments with each other through requests, enabling them to coordinate their different work activities and accomplish objectives.

George reported that he often found himself angry with the people in his unit, and that he was often short and withdrawn in his expression of this anger. When asked what the anger was about he replied that he became angry when he felt that he had to ask people to do things, because they should know what to do and that it was an insult to him to have to ask. Further exploration revealed that this was a pattern of behaviour he had learned in his childhood. From his family experience George learned that you offend people if you do not know what to do for them, and that you should not have to be asked. In short, if you cared you would be alert, anticipate what they want and do it for them. Furthermore, a very strong and unstated message he also learned was that if you did not do this, your fundamental worthiness (as a human being) was questionable.

George had a very powerful story and associated beliefs in one area of relating to people. His story carried an expectation that not only should he be alert to what others want done without them having to ask him, it also carried the unquestioned assumption that others should be as sensitive to him, especially as he was now in a senior position. We might be tempted to say that all he had to do was change the story and he could change his behaviour. However, his story also had a strong emotional grip on him.

Needless to say, there was a fair bit of tension associated with his story. A lot of emotional energy was required to maintain alertness to the needs of others, and not have to deal with the question of self-worth, as well as deal with the insensitivity of others when they did not spontaneously notice what needed doing. The emotional consequence was that most of the time George lived in a mood of resentment (a major elements in the model Some Basic Moods of Life). In other words, anger was almost permanently in the background, easily triggered when he felt he had to ask others. His story and his mood were also embodied; ie, he had configured his posture so that (i) he found it hard to ask people and (ii) when he did ask, his requests had a “sharp edge” to them and were not conducive to developing positive workplace relationships.

It was important to provide George with some important distinctions about the crucial role of requests in the workplace, including key elements that are essential for making effective requests. This provided him with some important ways of using language to enhance his delegation skills, and he now had a strategy for making effective requests. However, in the approach of Ontological Coaching, the focus is not on providing people with strategies *per se*, and working only in the domain of language is insufficient for facilitating enduring change.

It was important to be attentive to what was happening with George in the domains of emotions and body. In addition to his mood of resentment, the coach also assessed that George was holding fear in his body, which can be thought of as a mood of anxiety (another Basic Mood of Life). Fear often “lives in” the chest area, as an expression of withdrawing in to protect ourselves. It would seem that George had also experienced a constancy of background fear in his childhood. If he was not alert to the needs of others and what he needed to do for them, then he would be chastised or punished. For children especially, this means not being accepted, even ostracised, something never pleasant to deal with, and certainly to be feared. George’s moods of resentment and anxiety became embodied, and in subtle, yet impactful, ways these moods permeated how he was in the workplace.

The embodiment of moods is a powerful influence on how situations are observed, and the behaviour that is possible to improve circumstances. Moods can be regarded as predispositions for action: the particular mood we are in will predispose us to behave in certain ways and not others. George’s moods were not predisposing him to engage to delegate successfully through making effective requests.

One of the most profound areas of leverage in coaching, at all times with the permission of the person being coached, is to work with his or her posture. Even when George changed his wording his fundamental body configuration did not alter, and his negative story and mood remained. When making his request (he was asked to speak the words he remembered using in a recent incident) it was observed that he rounded his shoulders slightly, slumped forward and down, and that his chest concaved.

With George’s permission, the coach stood behind him and lightly held his shoulders whilst George repeated his request. Even then, the coach noticed that George continued to subtly concave his chest. The coach shared this observation with George, who immediately became aware of what he was doing and was amazed. Again giving the coach permission to lightly hold his shoulders, George rehearsed his request by holding his chest firm (but

not rigid). To his surprise, not only was there a different emotion in how he made the request, exemplified in an alteration in the tone of his voice (from harsh to a medium-soft tone with greater depth), but also the very words he spoke altered to be more inclusive of the person he was asking for assistance. This was practiced a number of times so that George could get “the feel” of what it was like to make requests from a “different body”.

In a follow-up conversation George reported “feeling much lighter, more at ease with myself, and more open in my dealings with people”. He also reported that “things were much better at home”. In addition, his performance improved, reflected in a more positive performance review. He was able to experience himself differently in a key area of his work, which also produced different experiences in relating with work colleagues and his family. Work and home took on a more positive meaning for him.³⁴

Conclusion

At a time when coaching is more readily characterised as an industry than a profession, substantive theoretical frameworks are required to enable coaching to move towards becoming a credible profession, and therefore have the same community standing and recognition as other professions. Ontology provides a rigorous theoretical basis for a sound coaching methodology and acceptable coaching practice. By understanding precisely how coaching clients use language, emotions and physiology to structure their reality, an Ontological Coach can respectfully intervene to support clients become different observers develop a more constructive and less limiting reality. Shifts in language, emotions and physiology allow for the formation of new perspectives, which can automatically open new pathways for effective action and the accomplishment of desired outcomes that were not previously available.

Notes

¹ Lou Marinoff, *Philosophic Practice* .

² *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, edited by Ted Honderich, 634.

³ Perry Zeus and Suzanne Skiffington, *Coaching at Work*.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

⁵ John Searle, *Speech Acts and Meaning and Expression*.

⁶ Many of Flores ideas can be found in Terry Winograd and Fernando Flores, *Understanding Computers and Cognition* and Charles Spinoza, Fernando Flores and Hubert Dreyfus, *Disclosing New Worlds*.

⁷ Humberto Maturana and Francesco Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding and Autopoiesis and Cognition*.

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- ⁸ It is interesting to note that this was also a major discovery that occurred in the field of quantum physics. See, for example, Robert Nadeau and Menas Kafatos, *The Non-Local Universe: The New Physics and Matters of the Mind*.
- ⁹ Humberto Maturana and Francesco Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition*. 8.
- ¹⁰ Humberto Maturana, Reality: The Search for objectivity or the quest for a compelling argument. *Irish Journal of Psychology*. 1988, 9:1 25-82.
- ¹¹ George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*.
- ¹² Edward Sapir, *Language* and Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality*.
- ¹³ Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*.
- ¹⁴ Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*.
- ¹⁵ Ken Wilber, *Marriage of Sense and Soul*. ix.
- ¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, *op cit*.
- ¹⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* and *Philosophical Investigations*; John Austin, *How to do Things with Words*; John Searle, *op cit*.
- ¹⁸ For details of Basic Linguistic Acts and their application in Ontological Coaching see Alan Sieler, *Coaching to the Human Soul: Ontological Coaching and Deep Change*.
- ¹⁹ Robert Solomon, *The Passions*. ix.
- ²⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. 296.
- ²¹ *ibid* 172
- ²² *op. cit.* 173.
- ²³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.
- ²⁴ P. Salovey and J. D. Mayer Emotional intelligence. *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, 9, 185-211
- ²⁵ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence, Working With Emotional Intelligence, The New Leaders and Destructive Emotions*.
- ²⁶ See Daniel Goleman, *Destructive Emotions*.
- ²⁷ In *Destructive Emotions* Goleman comments that Maturana's theory was considered heretical in the 1970's, but "now influences thinkers in fields ranging from philosophy of mind and cognitive science to complexity theory" (307). Francesco Varela, *Naturalizing Phenomenology: Contemporary Issues in Phenomenology and Cognitive Science; The View From Within: First-Person Methods in the Study of Consciousness*; Petriot, Jean, Varela, Francesco J., Pachoud, Bernard, and Roy, Jean-Michael. Eds. *Naturalizing Phenomenology: Contemporary Issues in Phenomenology and Cognitive Science*; Depraz, N., Varela, F. J. and Vermersch. *On Becoming Aware: The Pragmatics of Experiencing*.
- ²⁸ Ernesto Spinelli. *The Interpreted World*.
- ²⁹ Michael White. *Narrative Therapy*.
- ³⁰ Richard Simon. A frog's eye view of the world. *The Networker*. May-June 1985, 32-34.
- ³¹ Humberto Maturana. Reality: The search for objectivity or the quest for a compelling argument. *op cit*.
- ³² Paul F. Dell. Understanding Bateson and Maturana: Toward a Biological Foundation for the Social Sciences. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*. 1985, 11:1 1-20.
- ³³ See Alan Sieler, *Coaching to the Human Soul: Ontological Coaching and Deep Change* for 25 more examples of Ontological Coaching in action.

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