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The Philosophical Influences That Have Shaped Coaching

PETER JACKSON AND ELAINE COX

This paper explores the impact of philosophical thinking on coaching practice. In particular it looks at the epistemology of Socrates (via the writing of Plato), Locke, Hume, Kant, and Dewey. Key concepts from each philosopher are introduced and the ways in which their thinking informs modern coaching practice are explored. In this article, the authors contend that coaching is an application of philosophy in two ways: firstly, as the application of philosophical techniques in order to help the client; secondly, as a manifestation of a long philosophical history. Jackson and Cox offer both an argument for and an experience of philosophy for coaching practitioners.

INTRODUCTION

If the reasons why people think the way they do were transparent there would be no psychology or therapy and coaching would certainly be much less interesting. As academics, coaches, and teachers of coaching, our professional lives are shot through with an interest in people's thinking and, in particular, that part of their thinking that remains unacknowledged or hidden. When we discuss ideas with developing practitioners in the course of our teaching, we are often struck by how philosophical theory permeates their practices even though they may not necessarily recognise these influences. We feel that a more explicit investigation of some of that history would offer a source of potential learning for practitioners and students alike.

In this article we look specifically at some of the possible roots of the thinking behind modern coaching practices. At the same time, given how diverse individual practices can be, we do not propose a mapping of the source of all modern coaching concepts to all possible precedents. Instead, in this article we draw from a sample of six key philosophical thinkers, and recognise some of their impact on coaching practices. In so doing, we hope to open the door to coaching practitioners to use the ideas, methods and concerns of philosophy to understand and develop their practice more fully. When working with students of coaching, we find that the process of formalising their own experience, finding language to describe it, theorising and synthesising different theories, and putting them back into practice creates a new level of constructive enquiry which heightens and accelerates the development of their practice. They come to know their own practice better by asking themselves where their ideas come from and whether they can be questioned or developed in a new way using different perspectives.

Let us, then, define the scope of our discussion. Philosophy could be described as the investigation of knowledge, the exploration of principles underlying knowledge (such as rationality, empiricism, logic, ethics, aesthetics) or, as in existentialist philosophy, an exploration of 'being' in the world. Within this broad range of the 'content' of philosophical thought we have chosen to focus on the problem of knowledge or epistemology. We will highlight the subtle influences on coaching of several theorists from rationalist, empiricist and pragmatic traditions. We believe that these provide the potential for fruitful reflection on practice and that they form a coherent 'unit' of investigation.

Even though philosophy is the business of abstract thought, it has enormous practical, albeit often tacit, implications. It is, in itself, a method of interacting with, responding to, and questioning the world. It could even be seen as a way of being in that world; for as Creel argues (2001, p.24), "when we try to stop doing philosophy, we find it's like trying to hold our breath indefinitely – we just can't do it!" The goal of philosophy is knowledge and truth about reality but not for their own sake; by considering what and how we know in the abstract, we seek to be better prepared to act effectively and to live well.

Like the philosopher, the coach seeks to pull out the essentials from the messy immediacy of the situation and to question premises and motivations in order to create clarity and understanding. Like the philosopher, the coach rarely stops with the first question asked. In these respects, a coaching session or relationship could be conceptualised as an opportunity to 'do' philosophy. Coaching can be seen as being first and foremost about helping a client think through a current problem efficiently and effectively; and to this end it is an applied philosophy of knowledge. To put it another way, whereas the goal of philosophy is knowledge and truth about reality and value at a more universal level, the goal of coaching is knowledge and the truth about reality and values at an individual level (for clients and coaches alike). The coach and the philosopher have, therefore, much in common. We have argued already that the content of philosophical thought can help practitioners to enquire of and develop their practice. We are also saying here that thinking philosophically can provide us with models of how we might think about coaching practice.

Let us briefly illustrate these two points. Student coaches learn that it is good to ask questions. They learn that open questions are more effective than closed questions (this is well covered in the practitioner literature). They may learn to ask questions to elicit the client's understanding rather than their own. They may learn these as *techniques* and may be quite good at these techniques. Imagine now that a coach decides he/she has a strong orientation towards relativism as a result of reflecting on their underlying philosophical orientation. Questioning then becomes not just a

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method, but the expression of a belief. It no longer needs to be remembered, but rather can be noticed, challenged, and refined. It is no longer something the coach simply *does*, but something the coach *wants*. Further, the coach may come to increasingly develop practice by thinking philosophically and questioning the coherence of their ideas about their practice (e.g., what happens if I abandon all pretence of knowing anything about the client's world view? What if I knew nothing?).

The Socratic Method is a structured discussion that helps a learner clarify and evaluate beliefs about a philosophical topic. The initial questioning is aimed at helping learners state clearly and, most importantly, to their own satisfaction, what they believe about something (such as the nature of knowledge or justice).

As we have said, the influence of traditional philosophical ideas typically goes unnoticed. In the following sections we introduce six major philosophical thinkers from the Western tradition, with a particular focus on epistemology, and we consider how elements of their thinking are in evidence in coaching practice. We have been selective in our choice of influences and have decided that these six in particular offer a spread and continuity of ideas. We freely acknowledge the absence of women and eastern philosophers in this list; similarly, we have not investigated the contribution of critical approaches such as Marxism and feminism and we have avoided the complexities of existentialism and postmodernism. There is so much to be said about all of these and we do not intend to imply that those we have chosen to highlight the 'best' of philosophy. It is, indeed, a 'conventional' choice and it is intended only as a starting point.

A brief introduction to the major thinking of each proponent is followed by a short exposé of the impact of their philosophical thinking on coaching practice. In the process of setting out these ideas we have generalised, interpreted and selected information. We do not in this exercise intend to misrepresent or distort any wider history of ideas or any different perspectives. Quite the reverse. We believe strongly in opening up and challenging the thinking of all coaching practitioners. Too often that challenge remains located in universities and post-graduate courses. We invite readers, whether you agree or not, to engage with the following arguments and to use them to find more of their own philosophical thinking about their practice.

MAJOR PHILOSOPHICAL THINKERS

In this section we briefly introduce six major thinkers as potential influences on coaching practice: Socrates (via the writing of Plato); Descartes; Locke; Hume, Kant and Dewey.

Socrates (469 – 399) and Plato (423 – 347)

The importance of Socrates' and Plato's contribution to Western philosophy cannot be overemphasised: all the Western thinking that follows rests on their work. In this section we want to focus on the Socratic Method. The method was used by Socrates to elicit philosophical understanding from his pupils and although he left no writing himself, the method is illustrated in a number of dialogues written by Plato, his most famous student.

The Socratic Method is a structured discussion that begins with a series of related questions that build on each other in order to help a learner clarify and evaluate beliefs about a philosophical topic. The initial questioning is aimed at helping learners state clearly and, most importantly, *to their own satisfaction*, what they believe about something (such as the nature of knowledge or justice). If learners' words were inadequate or their ideas not clearly formed, Socrates would then help them to formulate their understanding further by prompting them, sometimes provocatively, with suggestions. Only when ideas were clarified and the learner could say: 'Yes, that's exactly what it is', would he move to the next phase.

A second phase of questioning was then used to evaluate the learner's beliefs. Often Socrates' learners got angry at this point (e.g., in *Theateus*), but this irritation or challenge was necessary in order for his pupils to complete their learning. Socrates referred to himself as 'The Gadfly of Athens' (*Apology*). The purpose of this evaluation phase is to check and challenge and to make sure the articulated assertion is veritable. The Socratic Method did not draw on a specific theory or body of knowledge; rather, like coaching itself, it was a *modus operandi* that questioned everything in order to test the coherence of ideas and beliefs and consequently arrive at and be able to articulate their foundations.

Descartes (1596 – 1650)

Some two thousand years later, Rene Descartes also developed a method for discerning knowledge. His aim was to begin philosophy "all anew from the foundations" (1980), based on a method formulated with mathematical precision. The method, he claimed, would offer the same certainty and elegance of mathematics. It is primarily this method upon which Descartes' reputation as the founder of modern western philosophy stands.

In the *Discourse on Method*, he enumerated his method and the four rules which he considered essential for the success for any philosophical project:

1. To take nothing for granted. Everything would begin with and proceed by means of doubt, in order to avoid bias and prejudgement;
2. To split an argument into simple parts;
3. To proceed by degrees, from simple indubitable truths to more complex ideas;
4. To evaluate often in order to ensure that nothing is missed and that the whole argument is kept under review.

Descartes suggested that the last of these rules is most important: enumerations need to be so complete and reviews so general that nothing is omitted. It is necessary to show that any preferred alternative is only one possibility among many others, all of which deserve full consideration.

Descartes' initial application of the method was to seek affirmation of his own existence through a logical, rational process. From this he deduced his famous *cogito ergo sum* argument:

> I resolved to pretend that everything that had ever entered my mind was no more true than the illusions of my dreams. But immediately afterward I noted that, during the time I wanted thus to think that everything was false, it was necessary that I who thought thus, be something. And noticing that this trust – *I think, therefore I am* – was so firm and so certain that the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were unable to shake it, I judged that I would accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking. (Descartes, 1980, p. 17)

If I can only know my own mind and its contents with any certainty, I cannot possibly have knowledge of other minds or material objects. As a result, everything outside of my own mind becomes problematic. Everything can only be proved to exist by inference from my own consciousness.

Classic rationalists, like Descartes, believed that we are more than the sum of our empirical interactions with our environment and that we are endowed with a "rational soul". Apart from his method, one of Descartes' other important contributions to philosophical thought is the notion of subjectivism. His argument was that if I can only know my own mind and its contents with any certainty, I cannot possibly have knowledge of other minds or material objects. As a result, everything outside of my own mind becomes problematic. Everything can only be proved to exist by inference from my own consciousness.

Locke (1632 – 1704)

John Locke was a significant figure in the English Enlightenment and was greatly influenced by Descartes. He was stimulated by Descartes' rethinking of the foundations of knowledge. Despite coming to be associated with empiricism because of his emphasis on 'sense experience' as the source of knowledge, Locke maintained a strong respect for rationality. His approach is embedded in the methodological foundations of Socrates and Descartes — though his conclusions depart from theirs.

In his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke (1979) establishes two important premises. Firstly he argues that extreme scepticism is impractical, "If we will disbelieve everything, because we cannot certainly know all things, we shall do muchwhat[1] as wisely as he who would not use his legs, but sit still and perish, because he had no wings to fly" (*ibid.*, Introduction, p. 5). Secondly, he argues at length that the concept of innate human knowledge or wisdom is untenable. In making these arguments, he effectively rejects Descartes' attempt to create a perfectly rational understanding of the world. Instead, he argues famously for the concept of the human mind as a *tabula rasa*, an "empty cabinet" furnished by the ideas entering into it through the senses (*ibid.*, Book 1, Chapter 1, p. 15).

[1]In Hume's original usage, 'muchwhat' means 'almost'

Locke was not an atheist, but in arguing that religious diversity shows that the concept of God is not innate (*ibid.*, Book 1, Chapter 3), he opens the door to a kind of relativism. He argues specifically that the dogma of received opinions is counter to the search for truth and further that doctrine is used to subjugate the individual and their freedom to think. Based on these premises, Locke argues that "all ideas come from sensation or reflection" (*ibid.*, Book 2, Chapter 1, p. 2). Thence it follows that different people have different ideas based on different experiences (*ibid.*, Book 2, Chapter 1, p. 7), and that thinking is developed through the experience of the quantity and quality of ideas (*ibid.*, Book 2,Chapter 1, p. 24). Our thinking, therefore, is the sum of our experience.

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Locke further argues (*ibid.*, Book 2, Chapter 8, p. 7) that perceptions are mental phenomena distinct from the external objects they represent, and that complex ideas can be built up only in small steps consisting of ideas of which we can be certain. In this respect, much of the natural sciences remains speculative, as our knowledge of the constituent materials and "powers" of complex objects is simply beyond observation. Expressing extreme scepticism about objectivity, he argues that the effect of relations between complex bodies can be observed, but our confidence that we derive knowledge from this is necessarily very tentative. It follows that there is no such thing as privileged insight: all insights are valid and knowledge is gained through personal synthesis of the conflicting views of others. Thus, as Howard points out: "a great deal of humility will be needed in determining who is more nearly right about anything" (Howard, 2000, p. 151).

Hume (1711 – 1776)

Locke made a great leap in philosophy with his elevation of sense experience. Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* is an explicit attempt to find a middle path between an obscure and arcane abstract metaphysics and the everyday, unstructured, natural philosophy of "taste and sentiment". Hume (2006) stated that he would be "happy, if we can unite the boundaries of the different species of philosophy, by reconciling profound enquiry with clearness, and truth with novelty" (*ibid.*, p. 10)! In so doing he explores the implications of empiricism, highlighting issues which lay the ground for the work of Kant and twentieth century pragmatists.

Hume retains much of Locke's empiricism. Yet he moves the focus of the discussion from Locke's emphasis on that of which we can be rationally certain, to the issues of cause and effect in the real world and, perhaps, what we might do about it. What Hume describes as 'true metaphysics' – based on experience and observation – is, in essence therefore, empirical enquiry. He rejects with conviction the certainty of divine truths and of the possibility of extending knowledge through reason alone. He argues that if rationality were sufficient, our concepts would be perfectly formed from the outset, whereas in fact they are developed and refined

by experience and observation (*ibid.*, p. 31). Not only does he consider this approach more practical and more accurate, but also more consistent: he argues that Descartes' sceptical rationalism is inherently inconsistent in that it must doubt its own foundation and method (*ibid.*, p. 116).

Probability is the cornerstone of modern scientific method, but is only referred to by Locke as a question of plausibility. Hume relates the strength of our belief that a particular cause will lead to a particular effect to the frequency with which we have seen it to be so (*ibid.*, p. 47), even though he argues quite specifically that this tendency to generalise is a part of human nature and not rational (*ibid.*, p. 38) and admits himself at a loss to explain it or to find a concurrence with other philosophical concepts. The nub of his scepticism on this point is that we cannot know for certain what will occur simply on the basis that it has not occurred before. This is later referred to by Karl Popper (1979) as "Hume's problem"; Popper's solution to Hume's problem (the concept of falsifiability) had far-reaching effects on scientific methods.

Finally, Hume follows the logic of empiricism to a profoundly different conclusion, in relation to knowledge of ourselves, from the Cartesian dualist conception. In his *Treatise of Human Nature* (Cahn, 2002, p. 803) Hume notes that "When my perceptions are removed for any time, as by sound sleep; so long am I insensible of 'myself', and may truly be said not to exist". From this observation he goes on to argue that those who actually experience a 'self' are suffering an illusion. In this sense, his scepticism extends further than Descartes', doubting even the continuity of the self. As a materialist, Hume proposed that there is no 'self' that is independent of our perception. Instead the impression of self is given through successions of different perceptions that are in perpetual flux. To modern sensitivities, in part because of the subsequent influence of Kant, it is difficult to accept this extreme conceptualisation of the self.

Kant (1724 – 1804)

Kant's work can be seen as a revolutionary bringing together of rationalism and empiricism. Whereas for Descartes all our knowledge was given by God and available to us only through our ratiocinations, and for Hume all we could know was through our senses, for Kant the truth was not 'out there' in some form waiting to be discovered but instead proposed the only knowledge that we could have is created by us via the functions of our minds. For Kant 'reality' is organised and made intelligible through forms of perception - understanding and imagination that are hard wired into the experiencing mind. So, whilst Descartes had over-emphasised the role of reason in knowledge creation and Hume over-emphasised sense-perception, Kant argued that there should be no dichotomy: perception without conception (i..e., reason) was blind, and conception without perception was empty.

Thus Kant's composite theory introduces knowledge as a more complex process than hitherto presented. The sensory element is important, but mind is more than a passive recipient. Kant further submits that our minds actually impose forms or categories, such as space and time, upon our sensations, thus rendering all possible experience coherent. He calls the categories 'pure concepts of the understanding' (Cahn, 2002, pp. 960-965) and suggests they are essential for knowledge generation. The notion of these concepts of understanding has a significant impact on all philosophical thought that follows. For Kant, then, the mind is a complex set of *a priori* concepts and is not the blank sheet of the empiricists.

The constant interaction between our environment and our meaning making is, according to Dewey, a vital part of knowledge creation.

Whereas Hume had argued that the basis of our actions was founded in habit and that we build up knowledge over a period of time from our experience, Kant was not satisfied with this explanation and, almost echoing Locke's concern, questioned how and why we experience things in the first place. He claimed that the conditions for our understanding were in fact synthetic (i.e., produced when the mind determines the conditions of its own experience) and *a priori*, enabling us to categorise and order the world. It follows from this that our descriptions of the world necessarily have to conform to the perceptual tools of the mind provided to us. Kant gives space and time and cause and effect, as examples of concepts (categories) that are synthetic and *a priori* and not empirically derived. We use these to categorise, order and shape the world around us. Accordingly, Kant's 'categorical imperative' gives an answer, of sorts, to Hume's question of why we seek and find relationships between events.

This paradigm shift from emphasis on the 'real' world to the perceived world was radical in Kant's day and has had an impact ever since on our contemporary thinking about perception and, consequently, on how we think about self-perception. In fact, Howard (2000, p. 204) has argued that Kant's interests in 'deconstructing' the process of, and conditions for, perception "catapults him into a postmodern mind-set two centuries before postmodernist scepticism and pluralism". For Descartes the self was a separate thinking thing, quite different in nature from the material body. For Hume, there was no self, only a bundle of perceptions that gave the impression of a self. Kant, however, argues that the self is a construct of the activity of the mind as it tries to bring all its sensations and cognitions together. The power of the mind to influence perception is widely accepted today, but has its origins with Kant.

Dewey (1859 – 1952)

John Dewey, considered one of the greatest American philosophers and educational thinkers, also rejected the stark division between rationalism and empiricism. However, unlike Kant, Dewey came to believe that a workable theory of knowledge must begin by recognising the development of knowledge as an adaptive

response to environmental conditions aimed ultimately at active restructuring of these conditions. Dewey argued that reason is not privileged in its access to knowledge by being outside itself but is an embedded process, a tool, with the capacity to understand and form perspectives on the world.

Like Descartes, Dewey constructed a theory of knowledge that claimed that what we know is initiated through a rational process. However, whereas Descartes considered that his method led to a clear knowledge of truth, *a priori*, Dewey rejects *a priori* forms of thought that presuppose that rationality structures our experience. He exposes the contradictions and conflicts of dualistic thinking, arguing that a certain unity of experience precedes our rational division of stimulus and response and that these two emerge only as a product of our actual experience. For Dewey a stimulus was some "transaction demanded by nature" while a response is a "historically based adjustment" (Armitage, 2003, pp. 55-58). Together they formed a reflexive arc – what Dewey called a "continual reconstitution" (1896, p. 99). Thus Dewey decentred reason by showing that subjectivity, consciousness and self are emergent processes rooted in transactions between organisms and organisations. The constant interaction between our environment and our meaning making is, according to Dewey, a vital part of knowledge creation.

He further believed that any justification for a belief is grounded in individual experience: it is an empiricism made individual. An experience may be a thought process, the resolution to a problem or an everyday action that has to be completed. Dewey views such intentional experience as necessarily goal-oriented and distinguishes it from the flow of just experiencing things, where there is no goal and no process to achieve a goal. Dewey argues that experience has order and a start and end point and this is why it appears to have an aesthetic dimension; meaning is made through a kind of narrative construction that provides not only satisfaction but also a justification for our beliefs. It appears that the entire process is unified, has continuity and is part of a whole, which arouses feelings of satisfaction as we become aware of the possibility of completion.

Dewey's philosophy is, therefore, built on the difference that he sees between routine action and reflective action. Unlike the flow of routine action, which is not pre-meditated, reflective action is based on "active, persistent and careful" consideration (Dewey 1910, p.6), and the need to solve a problem. This is a rationalism of action. For Dewey it is in problem solving that we find "the steadying and guiding factor in the entire process of reflection." Although Dewey appears to borrow the notion of the mind as an active power from Kant, he externalises and contextualises the other features of Kant's critical idealism. Kant's hidden synthetic operations become overt actions: Dewey claims that in order to have an experience we need to do something: there is always a physical or mental activity, or both, being done in an experience.

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Summary

This brief overview of a small subset of Western thinkers is already abstract and partial. At the risk of oversimplifying we feel that it is helpful at this point to take stock once again. We have highlighted the Socratic Method, the avid questioning for clarity from Socrates, from which extends the elevation of reason. We moved on to Descartes who sought to use reason as the pure basis of knowledge and in so doing created the dualism of self and body. While careful not to shake religious dogma, Locke argued for the primacy of sense-experience as the source of knowledge. Hume took this to its logical conclusion: atheism and the bundle of senses theory of self, and it took Kant to reconcile reason and perception, self and sense, in a systematic manner. In this sense, Dewey might be seen as the implementer of Kant, turning the theory of knowledge into a practical way of knowing. We now turn to a consideration of how each of these ideas can be seen to emerge in coaching practice.

IMPACT ON COACHING PRACTICE

We argued in the Introduction that the goal of coaching is knowledge and the truth about reality and values at an individual level (for coaches and clients). In this respect, coaching is a dynamic interaction between two people who are cooperating in searching for greater clarity about the truth relative to the topic of concern to the client so that a suitable resolution may be found. It is, we would argue, a powerful dialectic.

However, as Creel explains, high motivation and a right attitude are "not enough to ensure progress toward the goal of philosophy" (p.43). Effective methods are also necessary. The same statement could have been made about coaching. In the next section we highlight the importance of the philosophical thinking discussed above in relation to coaching, what assumptions and methods it leads us to in our practice, and how it can better inform our own thinking and reflection about that practice.

The Socratic Method relies on suspension of search for solutions and instead focuses on exploring underlying assumptions and personal values related to the issue at stake. It demands that we release our attachments to solving the problem and let go of our own judgments and ideas enabling us to listen to the client.

Impact of Socrates and Plato

The biggest impact of Socrates and Plato on coaching comes, we would suggest, through their exposition of Socratic questioning. There are six types of questions, each with a different purpose: conceptual clarification; probing assumptions; proving rationale, reasons and evidence; questioning viewpoints and perspectives; proving implications and consequences; and ultimately questioning the questions themselves.

Here again we have the opportunity to illustrate how philosophical practice and coaching approaches overlap. In the Socratic Method the learner makes an assertion and the teacher initiates an evaluation process. While the issues discussed in the Socratic Dialogues are the stuff of traditional philosophic inquiry (love, poetry, truth, etc.), coaching frequently concerns itself with more tangible problems,

for example, career development or organisational survival. All the same, the method is directly relevant to coaching, even if the six types of questions are not necessarily used in themselves. Indeed, facilitators of adult learning and development, including coaches, draw on the manner and intent of Socratic questioning through similar problem-solving models (for example, Neenan & Palmer, 2001a). At a practical level, Rogers (2004, p. 57) warns against "advice-in-disguise questions" and Whitworth, Kimsey-Hall, and Sandahl (1998, p. 64) caution against closed questions and "information gathering". But these warnings may only leave the developing coach struggling to remember the rules. Socratic questioning provides a more useful framework that helps guide the practitioner towards effective questioning, as Padesky (1993) has argued in relation to cognitive-behavioural therapists.

It is not only procedure, but also the underlying principle, of Socratic Method that applies to coaching. Note that the Socratic Method inherently relies on the suspension of any search for solutions and instead focuses on exploring underlying assumptions and personal values related to the issue at stake. It therefore demands that we release our attachments to solving the problem and let go of our own judgments and ideas in order to enable us to listen to the client. It requires a commitment and a process to build a shared awareness of the fundamental questions of interest to the client. If this outlook is used in the process, effective questioning— meeting Rogers' description of "deeper" (p. 63), "super-useful" (p. 64) questions or Whitworth *et al*'s 'curiosity' (1998, pp. 63ff)—becomes much more likely.

As an approach to doing philosophy, which is perhaps an extension of the Socratic Method and may be equally useful for coaches, we also recommend Creel's (2001) model of what is termed *rational dialogue*. Creel (2001) maps out a four-phase model of rational dialogue: assertion, justification, comprehension and evaluation. In this model, the first two phases belong to the speaker and the second two to the listener. The listener's comprehension is considered important in order to understand correctly what the speaker has said. This is critical for coaches as it illustrates the importance of reflecting, paraphrase and summarising. In Creel's original model, evaluation is also undertaken by the listener and therefore might run counter to many (though not all) people's coaching practice. The difference, though, is merely one of emphasis, as the client-centred coach would simply encourage the speaker (client) to evaluate for themselves what they are saying.

A final note of caution on questioning techniques: knowing the right questions to ask to 'sting' a client into realisation or awareness is an important skill for the coach. Also important, though, is knowing when to stop asking questions. On the one hand, the intention is to stimulate rather than irritate; on the other, if the coach waits until a client is absolutely clear about the assumptions underlying their values and beliefs, for example, there may be no action. As Howard

argues (2000 p. 26) "there is a time for questioning and a time for doing. Each, at best, forms, informs and is informed by the other".

The Socratic dialogue – the whole idea of a constructive dialectic – is a foundation stone for both the method of philosophical inquiry and the collaborative reflective process which take place in coaching. Neither can be meaningful without a degree of challenge, of testing the truth. The philosophies that follow, each with their own epistemology, embody different ways of challenging our understandings of what we think we know and what we think is happening around us — but all of them answer to the echo of Socrates' questions.

Impact of Descartes

Descartes' influence on coaching is less obvious than either Socrates or the empiricists that follow. In the very concept of dualism, however, Descartes sows the seeds of what in many ways the axis around which much coaching practice spins: the concept of the self.

By perceiving himself (or his self) as disembodied, Descartes initiated the idea of the thinker/observer who is detached from the world and who is self-conscious and independent. Guignon (2005, p. 43) describes Descartes' formulation of the concept of the self as a "knowing subject, a self-encapsulated mental substance or a field of consciousness, that represents reality, but is not integrally part of it". Guignon describes how the self for Descartes is experienced as a "*nuclear self*, something self-defining and self-contained, rather than as the extended self of earlier times" (p. 43, authors' italics). Thus the self has no relationship to anything outside itself. The potential impact is a loss of satisfaction – of not knowing our place or our purpose in the world.

Descartes' dualism supports a coherence theory of truth: if my thinking is the test of my existence (*cogito ergo sum*) then beliefs are only true because they cohere with other beliefs formulated by the mind during its insular ratiocinations. Howard (2000, p. 129) identifies this as the philosophical foundation of our contemporary individualistic universe:

> Everything else, apparently, is open to doubt, but here am I, doubting this, doubting that. Whatever else gets torn away, *I* remain, questioning, tearing, thinking, thinking, thinking. He suggests that any contemporary reference by clients to 'finding myself' or becoming authentic, seems to presuppose a Cartesian model of personal identity. (Howard, 2000, p. 129)

Following Cartesian dualism we may tend to take our clients' agendas and their rationales as the only measure of truth: clients tell their stories and as long as they are internally consistent or

Following Cartesian dualism we may tend to take our clients' agendas and their rationales as the only measure of truth: clients tell their stories and as long as they are internally consistent or coherent, we tend to believe and value what they say.

coherent, we tend to believe and value what they say. Dualism also opens the possibility of the self as separate, able to observe and evaluate its own behaviour and perhaps values and beliefs. However, we can see how infinite regress becomes a danger with the coherence theory of truth inherent in Descartes thinking, and in practice there is the ever-present possibility of collusion. At a practical level the objection is immediate: surely we have a duty to assist clients in recognising the limits of their constructed narratives, dreams and plans. The client's world view must be tested against something outside of itself. Similarly, as the reflective observer of our own behaviour, we must find strategies to guard against our selves becoming deluded and self-justifying in their own reliance on coherence.

There is still a shadow side in that too little faith in the client's ability can be self-fulfilling. In doing so, coaches may set themselves up as arbiters of what is right or true and thereby risk fostering compliant servants instead of accountable adults and clients who come to feel swamped in data and unable to progress.

Descartes has had a substantial influence on subsequent thinking about the nature of knowledge and about identity. Any view of the self as a non-physical mind inhabiting a material body has its roots in Cartesian dualism and this has impacted current counselling (and coaching) practice. As Howard argues, we currently organise our lives to satisfy this tangible self and make ourselves 'real'. We also need others who will "help us 'explore' ourselves, 'develop' ourselves, 'express' ourselves…" (Howard, p. 131). A pure Cartesian world is one that has informed some key concepts in coaching, but also creates some of its pitfalls. Our discussion of some of the later philosophers will shed some light on managing these pitfalls.

Impact of Locke

We have mentioned the objection of reasonableness to a pure coherence viewpoint: this objection is the echo of empiricism. The empiricist theory of truth suggests that there should be some *correspondence* with the external environment; translated into practice this means strategies to test hypotheses. The empiricist influence on humanism builds on, but is different from, that of Descartes.

As coaches, what strikes us first and foremost about Locke's epistemology is his pragmatic separation of things in themselves and the human sense experience of those things. We cannot entirely know the mechanism of how the external world triggers our sense experience, but we can know that sense experience. Locke thus accepts Descartes' separation of the self, but sees it as moving in a necessarily *real* world. From this point on, this idea runs like a thread through centuries of western thought, disputed and developed by Kant and later Husserl who couched phenomenology as a specific branch of philosophy. But our use of it in coaching is probably most obviously derived via the humanistic psychology of Maslow and Rogers. We would argue that three key coaching concepts arise from this with which many practitioners will be familiar:

Firstly that the client's view of the world is not the same as the world itself;
Secondly, that it is the client's view of the world that will determine his/her behaviours;
Thirdly, that our own opinions on, and responses to, the client's situation are necessarily provisional.

From these three flow a number of significant coaching practices: adherence to the client's agenda (in the sense that it is all that can be known rather than that it is *correct*); reflecting back; proposing opinion only as hypothesis. While empiricism balances rationalism to some extent, there is still a shadow side in that too little faith in the client's ability can be self-fulfilling. In doing so, coaches may set themselves up as arbiters of what is right or true and thereby risk fostering compliant servants instead of accountable adults and clients who come to feel swamped in data and unable to progress.

We may deal with the separation of objective and subjective worlds simply by accepting it, but there are also approaches which may seek rather to challenge or deal with that separation. The much quoted, "a map is not the territory" originates from Alfred Korzybski's (1933) explicit exploration of precisely this problem in relation to how the language we use affects the limits of our thought. The goal of Korzybski's *General Semantics* is to align language to purpose. Here we are reminded of the use of metaphor and in particular how we can encourage the client to adapt their own metaphors better to deal with the issue at hand. Dunbar (2005) gives a nice example; we imagine a client feeling stuck in a tunnel: "Maybe the ground is wet and the feet can loosen. Maybe they are stuck with glue and the glue is so cold that is has become brittle". Similarly we may challenge the subjective view and suggest a reframe of the problem; e.g., from a negative to an appreciative view of their objectives, performance or ability.

The nature of what we know is, as we have said, at the heart of coaching; Locke's empiricism enables evaluation to be critical without descending into scepticism. He steers a course between what can be reliably inferred from existing knowledge and the uncertainty of experience. We might look upon this as too tentative: the gap between the two seems wide in Locke's thought. Yet in coaching practice we are often faced with clients holding firm to unfounded or simply unhelpful beliefs. In addition, part of Locke's historical significance was to start the separation of knowledge from dogma; this more democratic attitude to the nature of knowledge perhaps presages something that would later be picked up by twentieth century humanism. These ideas became more explicit in Hume's thought.

Impact of Hume

Hume has been described as taking the process of sceptical questioning further even than Socrates (Howard, 2000 p. 181). In setting out to reconcile "profound enquiry with clearness,

and truth with novelty" (Hume, 2006, p. 10), Hume leads us to a pragmatic view of the extent and nature of our knowledge. He uses logic to question both the certainties of others (notably, in the area of religious certainties), and our confidence in observations of causal relations; yet his programme is not one of destruction. Rather it is about trying to see the world for what it is, to identify the limits or our perception and our reason, not to destroy beliefs, but to appreciate them for what they are.

This questioning of what is 'given' has a direct parallel in the question of where coaching practitioners might draw for the knowledge to support evidence-based practice (see Grant & Cavanagh, 2004; Drake, 2009). In a direct parallel to Hume's opposition, we have argued elsewhere that the immediacy of unstructured personal experience is to be offset against the reliability of more systematic investigation (Jackson, 2008). Hume's ideas do not entirely solve this problem, but they do highlight it. He points out the natural tendency to generalise and, although he cites quite arresting examples (how do we know the sun will rise just because it always has done?), it may also be true that this powerful urge leads to overgeneralisation. In the absence of any more certain information, we are all prone to evaluate our strategies on what is available to us, even to the extent of believing a particular technique is effective based on a single good experience.

This same human urge can be seen at the heart of the presentation in practice of phenomena such as overgeneralizing (Beck, 1967), 'awfulising' beliefs (Ellis, 1962), and the cycle of self-reinforcing experience (Bandura, 1994). The identification of these phenomena and the techniques to manage them have become more immediately available to coaching practitioners through cognitive-behavioural and rational-emotive behavioural approaches to therapy (e.g., Ellis, 1962; Beck, 1976) and later, similar approaches to coaching (e.g., Neenan & Dryden, 2002; Neenan & Palmer, 2001b).

For Hume, all *a priori* beliefs about the world were open to question. Against the spirit of the age (even to the extent that much of his work was published either anonymously or posthumously) Hume rejects any rational basis for belief in a Christian God. He demonstrates that most people must be wrong in their religious beliefs, as for any particular belief there are always more people with opposing beliefs; and if at any one time, most religious beliefs are wrong, what, he asks, leads us to believe that it is only our own that are correct? The question Hume offers us is, can any *a priori* or 'taken-for-granted' beliefs actually be taken for granted? While it may be considered outside the scope of the coaching relationship to question the client's religious beliefs, it is common to encounter deeply held cultural, familial and ethnic beliefs that need to be addressed in order for the client to make progress.

Coaching clients may express these beliefs in terms of obligations, necessity, or simple fact which they may equally relate either to their own behaviour or to others: "I don't have any choice", "he's *got to* apologise", "it's just the way it is". However, it follows from the above that these beliefs are open to question. Two common strategies to respond to this are to challenge the legitimacy of the belief or to challenge its utility. A response that is popular with our students is to ask whose voice we are hearing: "who is it who is saying 'it's just the way it is'?" By asking this question the belief is not contradicted, but the issue of whether it is correct is put into suspension; that is, it is seen as a belief rather than as a fact and the client is enabled to examine it from a more objective stance. A second popular response is simply to ask whether the belief helps or hinders the client's progress towards their goals. Again, the *truth* of the belief is put in suspension, but this time so the client can examine whether or not they will be better off without it.

Pragmatism opens the door to experimental or instrumental adoption of a view of reality. Hence, we might ask a client who has become stuck, "If you were not stuck, what would you do next?", or "What would be possible if you did like your boss?"

Hume encourages us to consider the possibility that our reasoning can be tested against real world experience and that our perceptions can be made more reliable through further observation (or the pseudo-observation of thought experiments). Hume does not offer a true synthesis of reason and experience, but as we have noted in relation to each of the philosophies we have considered, his thinking makes this next step more possible.

Impact of Kant

The faculties or categories of mind that are a central part of Kant's epistemology underlie most of psychological thinking today. Below we highlight four important areas.

1. Cognitive theory. Cognitive theory attempts to explain behaviour by understanding thought processes. Kant's notion of categories, as *a priori* concepts of the mind could be seen as influential in the subsequent development of ideas around the constructs that underpin cognitive theories—the categories, like schema, that are involved in cognitive processing. In addition, Kant was the first to make a systematic distinction between opinion, belief and knowledge and, in so doing, paved the way for later cognitive theories and interventions such as the ABC model of cognitive behavioural therapy.

2. Pragmatism. Pragmatism becomes possible once Kant has made the distinction between knowledge, opinions and beliefs. Knowledge, for Kant, has both objective certainty and subjective validity. Opinion, on the other hand, is both subjectively and objectively insufficient, since it can be neither certain nor valid. Belief, although subjectively sufficient, in that it carries conviction and personal validity, lacks the objectivity that makes it valid for everyone. Kant therefore saw belief as a pragmatic recourse, what we resort to when there is no knowledge. He gives the example of a doctor being required to make a diagnosis based on an educated

guess or belief (Rockmore, 2006, p. 77). Pragmatism is sometimes summarised by the phrase 'whatever works, is likely to be true' and because our experiences change, 'whatever works' also changes. The pragmatic stance suggests that truth is changeable and no one can claim to possess any final or ultimate truth. In coaching, helping the client to appreciate this possibility can often be developmental. Pragmatism also opens the door to experimental or instrumental adoption of a view of reality. Hence, we might ask a client who has become stuck, "If you were not stuck, what would you do next?", or "What would be possible if you did like your boss?" Students are often sceptical at first about the effectiveness of questions like this, yet discover that changing the reality, albeit temporarily and as part of the thought experiment, often opens up new possibilities.

3. Metacognition. Kant's epistemology suggests that we can know about the mind's consciousness. For Kant there are two kinds of informative knowing: knowledge from experience (synthetic judgments *a posteriori*) and knowledge of the conditions of possibility of experience (synthetic judgments *a priori*). The focus on the cognitive aspects of knowledge creation has given us the concept of metacognition and also self-reflection. Metacognition is the ability to become conscious of our own mental faculties and operations and both this and the inherent self-reflection it involves draw on the capacity to abstract from what we experience. This ability to reflect on our mental activity has impacted on our development of reflective practice and metacognitive and subsequent theories of learning and adult development. The possibility of the subjective and the objective also informed eventual theories of cognitive-development and theories of adult development. Kegan and Lahey (2003) have described in detail how in a range of workplace contexts we can build psychological space between our selves and our assumptions, thus moving them from subject to object. From a practical perspective, developing such metacognitive ability offers us an escape from automatism and prejudice.

4. Interpretivism. The implications of Kant's philosophy for coaching and for coaching research are far reaching. It is from Kant that we get the possibility of an interpretivist paradigm. Within the previous positivist paradigm, objectivity is the guiding principle and researchers are required to remain neutral in relation to what is being researched. This paradigm was based on Hume's proposition that there is a world is 'out there' from which we discover causal relationships and subsequently generalise from the particular results of our research to a larger population. Within the interpretivist paradigm the separation of 'out there' facts from the 'in here' subjectivity of the researcher is impossible. Knowledge is seen as something that is inherently constructed, rather than being the discovery of an independent, pre-existing reality. Thus the idea of causality is defined differently: in the interpretivist model, a causal relationship is simply one possible constructed

explanation for particular aspects of the world. And so from Kant the possibility of constructed knowledge is born, together with an inevitable dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity. The effect of this concept on practice is seen more fully through the ideas of Dewey.

Impact of Dewey

Unlike earlier philosophers, who viewed thought as a something purely subjective within an individual, Dewey sees it as the product of interaction between us and our environments and posits that knowledge has a practical role to play in the guidance of that interaction. He uses the term *instrumentalism* to describe his approach.

Two key concepts embedded in the approach are continuity and interaction. 'Continuity' refers to the idea that each experience is stored and carried into the future, whether we like it or not; 'interaction' builds on the notion of continuity and explains how past experience interacts with the present situation to create our current experience. Current experience is understood as a function of our past (stored) experiences which interact with the present to create unique, individual experience. Dewey (1938) asserts that there is continuity in any inquiry (informal or formal) as the conclusions reached in one inquiry become the means and material for carrying on further inquiries. Extrapolating from this theory we can see how a disciplined reflection on our experience can result in increased intuition, a core tool of the experienced coach.

The method Dewey describes will seem familiar to coaches, since it involves several stages that resemble any transformative learning process. These can be summarised as follows:

1. A difficulty is presented (it may be cognitive, practical or existential).
2. Tentative ideas for meanings and actions that could shed lighton the difficulty are gleaned from past experiences (our own and others).
3. Ideas are experimented with in order to resolve the difficulty.
4. Results are reflected on and evaluated, meaning is clarified, and the process continues until a working solution is found.

In many ways Dewey is articulating a learning cycle within these stages — similar to that presented much later by Kolb (1984). We can also recognise the important role of reflective practice in this method and the centrality of learning in coaching for development. Dewey (1934) describes how attended experience can be deciphered through reflection and utilised for problem solving:

> Each resting place in experience is an undergoing in which is absorbed and taken home the consequences of prior doing, and unless the doing is that of utter caprice

For an end to have true significance for someone it needs to lose its position as an "end" and become a point of transition — it needs to become a means. For coaches this is an important point to note as they reflect on the use of goals in their work and in their clients' success.

> or sheer routine, each doing carries in itself meaning that has been extracted and conserved. As with the advance of any army, all gains from what has been already effected are periodically consolidated, and always with a view to what is to be done next. If we move too rapidly we get away from the base of supplies – of accrued meanings – and the experience is flustered, thin and confused. If we dawdle too long after having extracted a net value, experience perishes of inanition. (p. 56)

As coaching practitioners we recognise these themes of continuity and interaction in guiding practice. Many approaches, but in particular developmental coaching, are influenced by Dewey's ideas either directly or via intermediary concepts such as action learning (Revans, 1980), experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) or reflective learning (e.g., Moon, 2004). In each case, the process of discovery is cyclical and emergent. We have noted elsewhere (Cox & Jackson, in press) that there is a balance to be struck between conceptualising a presenting issue as problem (to be solved) and opportunity (to develop).

Dewey also saw no distinction between ends and means; he found them to be of the same nature (1950). If some end (goal) is sought, certain means are employed to reach that end. Dewey was concerned with the reasons for reaching the end. If we imagine, for example, that a coaching client wants to increase her network of influential people, the end is a network of influential people. However, Dewey would argue that this end would be less than satisfying unless the client's broader intent was to reach the end in order to build on it and go further. So for an end to have true significance for someone it needs to lose its position as an "end" and become a point of transition — it needs to become a means. For coaches this is an important point to note as they reflect on the use of goals in their work and in their clients' success. As Dewey (1916) writes,

> Every means is a temporary end until we have attained it. Every end becomes a means of carrying activity further as soon as it is achieved. We call it end when it marks off the future direction of the activity in which we are engaged; means when it marks off the present direction. Every divorce of end from means diminishes by that much the significance of the activity and tends to reduce it to a drudgery from which one would escape if he could. (pp. 105-106)

The impact of Dewey's pragmatic approach to knowledge development has had an important impact on subsequent theory and practice development in a range of disciplines. He avoided the emphasis on knowledge and belief as the only ends of inquiry and was the first to combine both reflection and action in the quest for knowledge. As such, he provides a strong foundation for modern coaching practices.

SOME BINDING THEMES

We have now looked at six philosophers and their potential impact on coaching practice. To summarize, from Socrates we take the concept of dialectical enquiry; from Descartes, self awareness and the start of an individualist world view; from Locke and Hume the challenge of sense experience and the rejection of the *a priori*; from Kant the synthesis of the objective and subjective worlds; and from Dewey the practical application of knowledge as ongoing discovery. Some themes have emerged from these discussions that might be seen to bear exploration by practitioners in their own right:

- The dialectic as a founding principle: coaching involves an exchange of viewpoints. Is this to say that we cannot coach ourselves? Indeed we can; yet doing so requires that we somehow stand outside of our current perceptual, mental or emotional world. This is essentially what we offer as coaches.
- The relative weight of internal and external worlds: there is power in an empathetic acknowledgment of an individual's worldview in order to foster confidence and in providing a critical foil to these very same worldviews in order to stimulate growth.
- The variability of our processes in seeking to understand the external world: both as coaches and as clients we must acknowledge that our perceptions are tentative and relative.
- The need to act on something: coaching can be seen as a reflexive process of putting philosophy *into action*.

We would add a fifth theme that is only implicit in our investigation of epistemology but is constantly triggered by it in our practice:

- Coaching is a relationship between two people.

We claimed in the Introduction that the goal of philosophy was to pursue effective action and the 'good' life through abstract thought and that coaching parallels this objective in relation to another person, the client. However, coaching must be more than a collection of tools for knowing and a coach is more than 'gadfly'. Coaching draws on the dialectic nature of philosophy with its focus on the relationship and dialogue between two people — two fallible, different, inconsistent selves with their own perceptions and experience. Coaches have to manage both of the aspects of this dialectic in order to be effective in working with their clients. As an example of how these two sides of the process come together, take this extract from Rogers (2004) which was first published in 1967, based on a lecture given in 1954:

> It is only as I *understand* the feelings and thoughts which seem so horrible to you, or so weak, or so sentimental, or bizarre – it is only as I see them as you see them, and accept them and you, that you feel really free to explore all the

> hidden nooks and frightening crannies of your inner and often buried experience. (p. 34)

DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

We are very aware that this discussion is selective. We have focused on a limited number of Western philosophers and in particular their philosophy of knowledge. We hope that by doing so we have started to uncover some of the hidden dimensions of coaching practice – what might be thought of as the submerged part of the iceberg (Malderez & Badoczky, 1999) – and at the same time provided an exemplar for uncovering more of that hidden dimension. A similar exercise might be undertaken with a different area of philosophical enquiry (for example, ethics), with different philosophers, or from a completely different philosophical tradition (such as Indian or Chinese philosophies). For individual practitioners we feel that one final ethical issue emerges from this discussion. That is that our personal philosophies matter; that we are driven by traditions and beliefs which bear examination. The current discussion may not fulfil that role for all readers. Yet, given the core function of relatedness in the coaching undertaking, we feel that some degree of examination is a duty to our clients.

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