

## **Rethinking Coaching's Epistemological Roots: From Historical Myths to Living Practice**

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### **Abstract**

This article critically dismantles the epistemological foundations of coaching, challenging the discipline's reliance on romanticized historical myths and unexamined, borrowed paradigms. Moving beyond naïve distinctions between coaching, mentoring, and therapy, we advocate for a robust, autonomous knowledge base. By deconstructing assumptions about Socratic origins and adult learning, we firmly ground coaching praxis in pragmatism, constructivism, and process ontologies. Ultimately, we conceptualize coaching not yet as a fully settled profession, but as a fiercely contested, evolving space that demands critical reflexivity and a living philosophy to navigate the systemic and ethical complexities of human development.

*Keywords: coaching epistemology, process ontology, pragmatism, humanistic coaching, living philosophy, critical perspectives*

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### **Introduction: The contested landscape of coaching**

To speak about the epistemology of coaching is not an intellectual luxury but a critical necessity. The discipline is frequently characterized as a fast-growing and dynamic field. However, stating that coaching has fully consolidated as a 'profession' remains a highly contested claim. Scholars emphasize that coaching still struggles with professionalization, largely due to a fragmented and continuously debated theoretical foundation (Fillery-Travis & Collins, 2016; Garvey, 2011; Gray et al., 2016; Lowman, 2013).

This pluralism, while a source of vitality, raises a critical question: can a practice sustain itself without a clear epistemological foundation? To establish a credible knowledge base, researchers and practitioners must critically examine the assumptions that underpin coaching practice rather than accepting them as axiomatic (Bachkirova, 2016; Cox et al., 2014). Consequently, this paper shifts from a descriptive historical overview to an analytical exploration of coaching's roots. We seek to demonstrate that coaching must move beyond borrowed historical myths to construct an autonomous philosophical framework, ultimately functioning as a *living philosophy* that bridges knowing and being in practice.

Behind every coaching intervention lies a philosophy that guides decisions, frames relationships, and shapes the coaching journey (Bachkirova et al., 2017; Robinson & Renshaw, 2023). Yet, as Jackson and Cox (2009) noted, these philosophical foundations are rarely examined with the rigor they deserve. If the coach's underlying worldview remains implicit or unexamined, there is a risk of perpetuating marginalized voices and reinforcing dominant, oppressive narratives, rather than fostering true emancipation (Shoukry & Fatien, 2024).

### **Deconstructing foundational myths: Socrates, instruction, and learning**

The narrative surrounding the origins of coaching often suffers from romanticization. A common assertion in coaching literature – and one that risks mirroring commercial marketing rhetoric rather than academic rigor – is that coaching is inherently a “facilitated process of learning and self-discovery” descended directly from ancient philosophical traditions. However, this epistemological leap requires critical deconstruction.

In its early days, coaching was viewed fundamentally as an instructional, directive method designed to improve the physical performance of sportspeople or the operational efficiency of managers (Wildflower, 2013). As Garvey and Stokes (2014) note in their examination of the discipline’s evolution, the transition from an instructional paradigm to a developmental, reflexive one is a modern construct. Furthermore, the frequent assertion that coaching is a modern form of “Socratic dialogue” is an unsubstantiated leap that ignores historical context. Socratic dialogue, in its original Greek context, was largely a competitive parlor game designed for the intellectual amusement of the wealthy, heavily reliant on a specific power dynamic (Garvey et al., 2014). To claim Socrates as the “first coach” without critical qualification is to retroactively apply modern humanistic values to an ancient rhetorical exercise.

Similarly, the assumption that coaching is seamlessly synonymous with “learning” must be problematized. Hurlow (2022) challenges the uncritical adoption of adult learning theories in coaching, highlighting the epistemological problems of assuming that learning naturally or inevitably occurs through coaching conversations. If coaching is to distance itself from its instructional origins and genuinely position itself as a catalyst for agency and co-constructed inquiry, it must articulate exactly *how* this learning occurs epistemologically, rather than taking it for granted. The discipline cannot rely on simplified historical lineages; it must define its own epistemic boundaries.

### **Moving beyond the therapy-mentoring divide: The art of dialogue**

A persistent but increasingly outdated epistemological habit in coaching literature is the attempt to define the field through basic, exclusionary distinctions against psychotherapy and mentoring. These arguments – such as the simplistic assertion that therapy focuses on the past and healing, while coaching focuses on the future and goals – were heavily rehearsed in the early 2000s but are now widely considered naïve by contemporary scholars.

To continue drawing such rigid boundaries is to ignore the evolution of the discipline. As Stelter (2018) articulates in his conceptualization of “Third Generation Coaching,” the practice has moved beyond goal-setting scenarios and deficit-correction models. Today, coaching is fundamentally an *art of dialogue* centered on meaning-making and identity work, territories it inevitably shares with both mentoring and therapeutic traditions. Rather than compartmentalizing these fields, a rigorous epistemology recognizes that coaching operates within a continuum of human development. Bachkirova and Kauffman (2008) argue that studying and practicing coaching requires embracing “many ways of knowing,” adopting a pluralistic research perspective that tolerates a sort of overlap. Coaching’s distinctiveness, therefore, lies not in completely alienating itself from therapy or mentoring, but in its specific epistemic stance:

fostering reflective awareness and self-directed agency across diverse settings, ranging from life coaching to complex organizational environments.

### **Epistemological reflections: Grounding coaching in pragmatism and process ontologies**

If coaching is not merely a modern iteration of Socratic games, nor defined strictly by what it is *not* (therapy/mentoring), what then is its true epistemological foundation? Addressing this requires moving beyond a mere descriptive list of philosophical schools and instead proposing a cohesive, critical framework.

While humanism provides the ethical core of coaching, one of the most robust frameworks to translate this into actionable practice today might be pragmatism, coupled with constructivism. Bachkirova et al. (2017) argue that reconceptualizing coach education through pragmatism shifts the focus from finding an objective “truth” about the client to co-constructing actionable meaning. Pragmatism evaluates the validity of knowledge by its practical consequences. However, embracing philosophical plurality brings significant risks. Bachkirova and Borrington (2020) warn against “beautiful ideas that can make us ill” – theoretical constructs that sound impressive but, when misapplied, dilute professional rigor.

To avoid this epistemological relativism, pragmatism demands that profound humanistic and philosophical genealogies be explicitly operationalized in practice, rather than remaining abstract ideals. For instance, claiming that coaching uses Husserlian phenomenology or Franklian existentialism is insufficient unless we articulate the architecture of *how*. In pragmatic coaching, phenomenological *epoché* – the suspension of judgment (Husserl, 1900–1901/2001; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962) – is not an abstract ideal, but a specific conversational competence. It is the mechanism that allows the coach to bracket their own assumptions and encounter the client’s lived experience afresh. Similarly, the existential “will to meaning” (Frankl, 1946/1962) and the burden of radical freedom (Sartre, 1943/1956) are applied not as grand philosophical inquiries, but as practical frameworks to help clients navigate organizational or vital ambiguity and take ownership of their choices.

Furthermore, this meaning-making process is fundamentally hermeneutic and linguistic. The ontology of language posits that language does not merely describe reality but brings it forth. Through speech acts such as declarations, requests, and promises, humans coordinate action and generate new realities (Echeverría, 1994). The coaching dialogue thus becomes a creative linguistic act where transforming language equates somehow to transforming being. This creates what Gadamer (1960/1975) termed a “fusion of horizons,” where the client’s narrative is iteratively reinterpreted in conversation.

To anchor these hermeneutic and linguistic insights academically, coaching must align itself with contemporary process ontologies. As Robinson and Renshaw (2023) convincingly demonstrate through the lens of *Leadership-as-Practice*, neither leadership nor coaching are static traits; they are dynamic, emergent, and relational processes embedded in complex social systems. A process ontology demands that we view the coach not as a neutral observer extracting knowledge, but as an active participant whose linguistic choices and presence co-create the client’s reality (Maturana & Varela, 1987).

## **Philosophical tensions and critical perspectives**

While pragmatism and process ontologies provide a robust backdrop, their relevance depends on how they actively inform practice. A living philosophy of coaching emerges precisely in how practitioners navigate the epistemological tensions inherent in their work.

One central tension lies between guidance and non-directivity. The humanistic tradition – which constitutes the emotional and ethical heart of coaching – emphasizes freedom, self-determination, and an unconditional trust in the client’s capacity for growth (Maslow, 1943; Rogers, 1961). However, maintaining this profound humanistic stance creates a delicate tension when coaching operates within performance-driven organizational environments that relentlessly demand measurable outcomes, speed, and direction. The coach must hold space for emergence while remaining accountable to purpose, resisting the instrumentalist reduction of coaching to a mere tool for neoliberal productivity. Philosophical reflexivity becomes essential here, allowing the coach to distinguish between facilitating insight and subtly imposing normative frameworks.

Another critical tension concerns objectivity, participation, and power. Systemic epistemologies challenge the myth of neutral observation by positioning the coach as an active participant in the meaning-making process (Maturana & Varela, 1987). Language, presence, and inquiry are not neutral tools; they are constitutive elements of the reality being explored. Acknowledging this lack of neutrality inevitably leads to the political dimensions of coaching. As coaches draw from philosophical traditions, they must ask: whose philosophical perspectives are recognized, and whose remain marginalized? Shoukry and Fatien (2024) advocate for a Freirean perspective, arguing that coaching is a social practice intertwined with power. Addressing this requires what Roche (2022) describes as decolonizing reflective practice. Because coaching is a profoundly co-constructed phenomenon, a coach’s own cultural lens and implicit assumptions inevitably dictate the boundaries of the interaction (Mosteo, 2017; Mosteo et al., 2021). Cultivating an ethical awareness of how this worldview might influence the client’s agency is therefore paramount.

When these tensions are ignored, the discipline faces the risk of epistemological relativism – an “anything goes” approach where the celebration of plurality slides into an uncritical acceptance of all practices as equally valid. Indeed, recent critical scholarship warns against a systemic tendency within the profession to adopt philosophical stances out of sheer convenience rather than engaging in rigorous self-reflection, ultimately stunting the field’s growth. To counter this instrumentalism, Patania and Lejtenyi (2025) advocate for an explicit “ethical shift” anchored in epistemological criticism, arguing that empirical and pragmatic techniques alone are profoundly insufficient without a consolidated humanistic foundation. Furthermore, the absence of unified professional regulation complicates this landscape. Without shared epistemological benchmarks, regulatory efforts risk focusing on procedural compliance rather than reflective competence. Consequently, any attempt at regulation or standardization must first cultivate epistemological literacy and humility: practitioners’ capacity to critically examine how their implicit theories of human nature might unconsciously define or limit their practice.

## **From philosophical genealogies to systemic praxis: The complexity of learning**

While pragmatism, hermeneutics, and process ontologies provide a robust meta-theoretical framework, a living philosophy of coaching must ultimately translate into concrete systemic praxis. The epistemological challenge is to understand how these philosophical stances intersect rigorously with adult learning and psychological development.

Coaching fundamentally operates at the nexus of psychological insight, business acumen, and adult learning theories (Maltbia et al., 2014). However, as previously established, adopting adult learning in coaching requires critical reflection. Meaning-making in coaching is rarely a linear acquisition of skills; it is highly contextual, socially embedded, and often triggered by disorienting dilemmas in the client's environment. True coaching praxis functions within the client's *Zone of Proximal Development* (Vygotsky, 1930/1978), where the coach provides the reflective scaffolding necessary for the individual to access their next level of cognitive-emotional, or even existential awareness. This aligns seamlessly with Kegan's (1982) constructive-developmental framework, which posits that adult growth is not merely about acquiring new information but undergoing profound epistemological shifts. By facilitating the transition from "subject" (where clients are unconsciously embedded in their assumptions) to "object" (where they can critically examine them), coaching acts as a catalyst for the evolution of the self's meaning-making inner structures.

This non-linear reality of adult development is further substantiated by viewing coaching through the lens of complex adaptive systems. Cavanagh and Lane (2012) argue that human systems are inherently messy and unpredictable, rendering rigid, formulaic coaching interventions ineffective. Transformation does not occur through simple, predictable steps. Instead, intentional change emerges through a series of discontinuous, iterative discoveries – moving from the ideal self to the real self – which require resonant, highly attuned relationships to be sustained (Boyatzis, 2006). Epistemologically, this complexity perspective provides the operational mechanism for the humanistic traditions in coaching. The core conditions of empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1961) are therefore not merely "therapeutic warmth," but systemic prerequisites for intentional change. They create the psychological safety necessary for a complex human system to adapt, experiment, and transform.

## **Conclusions: Towards a living philosophy of coaching**

Exploring the epistemological roots of coaching reveals that the discipline cannot rely on simplified historical lineages, romanticized myths of Socratic origins, or naïve dichotomies that artificially separate it from related helping professions. Instead, the maturation of coaching requires a demanding, reflexive epistemology that acknowledges the field as a contested, continuously evolving space.

By moving beyond descriptive genealogies, this paper argues that coaching must anchor its actions in pragmatism and process ontologies, while fiercely protecting its ethical roots in humanism. This intertwined grounding allows the discipline to draw responsibly from its rich heritage – existentialism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and the ontology of language – and integrate them rigorously with contemporary theories of adult learning and complexity. When

these philosophical roots are explicitly connected to coaching praxis, they cease to be mere “beautiful ideas” and become vital tools for navigating human development.

Ultimately, coaching is proposed here as a *living philosophy* – a practical epistemology that bridges belief and practice, knowing and being, reflection and action. It is an ethical dialogue of becoming, wherein language, presence, and inquiry converge to foster agency. This living philosophy serves as an antidote to the profession’s current over-reliance on rigid competency frameworks, which risk standardizing the coach’s behavior at the expense of their ontological presence. Rather than seeking a definitive, dogmatic truth that closes the debate, the ongoing task for coaching scholarship and practice is to sustain this philosophical openness. The future of the discipline depends not on declaring itself a fully settled profession, but on its rigorous commitment to continuous epistemological inquiry.

We must recognize that a living philosophy of coaching is never a monologue of expertise; it is a shared breath of inquiry where, by helping others articulate their truth, we inevitably reshape our own humanity.

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