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THE SOCRATIC PRACTICE OF “CARE OF THE SELF” (*EPIMELEIA HEAUTOU*) AND THE COACHING PROCESS

In this paper I present a comparative analysis of the knowledge discovery process applied by Socrates and the contemporary life coach. On one hand, I will use the method of in-depth analysis of selected (Socratic) dialogues by Plato, and on the other one of coaching practice and coaching values formulated by the International Coach Federation. The term “care of the self” (*epimeleia heautou*) appears in the Socratic dialogues, *Alkibiades I* and *Apology of Socrates*, and this term is juxtaposed with the coaching idea of “being resourceful”. “Taking care of yourself” is about constantly gaining knowledge about yourself. This knowledge is extracted by Socrates and, in contemporary terms, by a life coach. The process of uncovering knowledge involves certain key elements that are shared by both the Socratic method and modern life coaching: establishing a relationship, a purpose and relevant questions. The analysis of each of these elements leads us to the conclusion that the key value of coaching, “the resourceful state of the coach and the coachee”, has its roots in ancient philosophy – in the wisdom of Socrates.

Keywords: life coaching, Socrates, resourceful state, *epimeleia heautou*, coaching relationship

INTRODUCTION

Coaching, as a process whereby the coach helps clients to achieve self-mastery and develop self-management skills,¹ has its own set of methods and standards outlined by the International Coaching Federation (ICF) and the European Mentoring & Coaching Council (EMCC). The primary values that are promoted by these coaching institutions are achieved by means of a person-oriented focus on the individual and his/her well-being, a belief in human self-reliance and empowerment, as well as in the ability to build well-functioning communities. The coaching mission can be defined as “doing good” rather than “avoiding bad”. On the part of the coach, “doing good” is based on providing respectful, kind, and attentive support to

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¹ Coaching is self-management with the help of a coach.

clients in their process of developing self-mastery, achieving life satisfaction and searching for self-knowledge. In order to perform the function of change initiator and to work effectively with the client and lead him/her to a resourceful state, the coach him/herself must be resourceful. Being resourceful means having such internal competencies at one's disposal as: emotional intelligence, ideological openness, an attitude full of kindness and empathy that is uncritical and respectful of others, and a readiness to listen actively and deeply. This state can be achieved by an ongoing search for self-knowledge through the identification of one's preferences, goals, and emotions. In other words, the coach must attain order in the mind, or a state of "being sensible" to use the words of Greek wisdom (Plato): "[...] and others who were of less repute seemed to be superior men in the matter of being sensible" (*Apology*, 22A²).

The importance of the coach's own resources in the process of coaching has not only been confirmed in psychology but also in its predecessor, Greek philosophy, which, starting from the fifth century BC, encouraged the development of self-knowledge and care of one's soul. The coaching term "managing one's resources" can be expressed in the language of philosophy as "looking after one's self" or to use Michel Foucault's term "care of the self" (Foucault, 2005). The first promoter of "care of the self", well-known from ancient Greek sources, was Socrates, who has often been presented in the coaching literature as the prototype of the coach (Bennett and Bush, 2009; Cox, 2013). Here, I would like to focus on one aspect of Plato's stance, which in my opinion, could constitute a theoretical basis for the above-mentioned coaching idea of "managing one's resources". In this connection, I will reconstruct and analyze the concept of "care of the self" on the basis of Plato's Dialogues from the Socratic period, with particular emphasis on *Alcibiades I* and *Apology*. Then I will compare this concept with the values set out by the International Coach Federation, so as to demonstrate that the key value of "the resourceful state of the coach and the coachee" has a great deal in common with the wisdom of Socrates. It would even appear that the contemporary method of "self-management with the help of a coach" has, to a great extent, borrowed its content and goals from classical Greek philosophical anthropology and therefore represents a contemporary, popular version of Socratic philosophy.

In the dialogues, *Alcibiades I* and *Apology*, the term "looking after one's self" (Gk. *epimeleia heautou*),⁴ which is crucial from the point of view of this research, appears in a sense

² All the quotations of Plato after: Plato (1921–1969). *Plato in Twelve Volumes*. trans. H.N. Fowler. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

³ We do not know if Plato was the author of this dialogue, but for the purposes of this article this is of little significance. Even if it was written by one of Plato's disciples or anyone else inspired by Socratic Platonic philosophy, it still shows the Platonic current in philosophical standards relating to human ethical and social development and the concept of human nature.

⁴ Michel Foucault defines care of the self: "What I mean is that, taking a historical view over some, or at least one or two millennia, you find again in these forms of knowledge the questions, interrogations, and requirements which, it seems to me, are the very old and fundamental questions of the *epimeleia heautou*, and so of spirituality as a condition of access to the truth" (Foucault, 2005).

that can partly be identified with the ancient Delphic maxim, “know thyself” (Gk. *gnothi seauton*). The ancient practice of “care of the self” was aimed at personal transformation, where the changes taking place within the person had a direct influence on the quality of life, with life becoming consistent with self-knowledge. In the context of coaching, it is not only the coach’s life that becomes qualitatively better but above all that of the coachee. By looking after him/herself, the coach is, at the same time, better able to look after the client. This same thought flows from the lips of Socrates: “anyone who is ignorant of his own belongings will be similarly ignorant, I suppose, of the belongings of others” (*Alcibiades I*, 133e).

What is self-knowledge according to Socrates? It is the awareness that human beings are in fact souls: “man [...] turns out to be nothing more than soul” (*Alcibiades I*, 130c). From the perspective of the ancients, the soul was the seat of knowledge and thought (*Alcibiades I*, 133c). Only a person who thinks, seeks knowledge, and understand the nature of things can take care of others, whereas the person who is locked in ignorance cannot teach others what he himself does not have “but could one possibly impart a thing that one had not?” (*Alcibiades I*, 134c).

According to ancient wisdom, a person desiring to know and care for him/herself should find a master, mentor, or guide to help in the process of self-transformation. Alone, due to such factors as subjectivity, mental blocks and limitations, often one’s full potential cannot be realized. The master, however, thanks to skillfully posed questions, can uncover someone’s knowledge. What is emphasized here, then, is the function and value of a master-student relationship. Socrates was a care-of-the-self-teacher, but at the same time, he was a care-of-others teacher, for his ultimate goal was the good of others, the social good. Getting to know oneself (with the help of a teacher) was intended to serve society, or in the Greek context, the polis.

The Socratic method of posing questions was an elaborate, two-stage method which consisted in reducing his interlocutor’s views and convictions to absurdity (Gk. *Socratic elenchus*) and then helping to give birth to new, true knowledge of the self (Gk. *maieutics*). The outcome of this process could contribute to the improvement of social life.

Alcibiades, Socrates’ interlocutor in the dialogue of the same title, sets himself the goal of ruling the state, without thinking, however, about the quality of this rule if it were to come about. Socrates gently rebukes his interlocutor by reducing his thesis to absurdity, but then, together with his interlocutor, he goes on to establish the goal (what it means to be human and how to get to know one’s self) and consistently works towards it. “In what way can the same-in-itself be discovered? For thus we may discover what we are ourselves” (*Alcibiades I*, 129b). Coaching does not use such abstract theses, but it is more structured than Socrates’ method. Socrates relied, above all, on his own intuition and wisdom. In this context it is worth emphasizing that although the talent, resourcefulness and personality of the coach are crucial in the coaching process, a considerable role is also played by knowledge of proper session planning, techniques, types of question and the role of supervision and credentialing. At the same time, the coach treats what they do primarily as an activity for which they are paid, whereas for Socrates it was a calling, one that was more powerful even than death. “[...] with orders to spend my life in philosophy and in examining myself and others” (*Apology*, 28e).

Both in the coaching process and in the Socratic method, being resourceful makes it possible: firstly, to enter into a coaching relationship, secondly, to ask the relevant key questions

that will result in the establishment of appropriate goals that are positive, concrete and in harmony with the coachee, and thirdly, to discover within the client the power to realize the established goals.

THE SOCRATIC AND COACHING RELATIONSHIPS

Socrates was a person with a kind and friendly disposition who was open to people and to the world. He was, however, prone to placing only a limited trust in his interlocutors, being aware of the prevalence of mistaken ways of thinking. He reprehended superficial logic and mistakes in thinking, but he did this in such a skillful and good-humored fashion that his interlocutors quickly took over Socrates' line of thought and used it to replace their previous mistaken way of thinking:

Theaetetus

But I assure you, Socrates, I have often tried to work that out, when I heard reports of the questions that you asked, but I can neither persuade myself that I have any satisfactory answer, nor can I find anyone else who gives the kind of answer you insist upon; and yet, on the other hand, I cannot get rid of a feeling of concern about the matter.

Socrates

Yes, you are suffering the pangs of labor, Theaetetus, because you are not empty, but pregnant.

Theaetetus

I do not know, Socrates; I merely tell you what I feel.

Socrates

Have you then not heard, you absurd boy, that I am the son of a noble and burly midwife, Phaenarete?

Theaetetus

Yes, I have heard.

Socrates

And have you heard that I practice the same art?

Theaetetus

No, never (*Theaetetus*, 148e–149a).

In a sense, Socrates left his interlocutors with little room for maneuver, provoking and encouraging them to look deep inside themselves. In this way he created an exceptional and secure relationship in which the interlocutor felt curiosity, but also a sense of momentary discomfort. This discomfort, resulting from being provoked into a changed way of thinking, worked to the advantage of the interlocutor. An almost identical situation can be seen in coaching, where an atmosphere of trust, attention and sincerity is intended to promote a change in the client's way of being, even though – this may initially be troubling and stressful.

The ability to co-create a relationship is one of the key coaching competencies. It is thanks to this relationship (which is characterized by authenticity and transparency) that the other person will discover within himself the capacity to use that relationship for growth, and change and personal development will occur (Rogers, 1995). In a significantly more concrete way than in the case of Socrates, we can point to some of the factors that lie at the heart of

a good, deep coaching interaction. Research has shown that specific elements contribute to the creation of the above-mentioned atmosphere of trust, attention and sincerity, including: face-to face contact, the appropriate frequency of meetings and the coach’s skill in active, supportive listening (Gyllensen and Palmer, 2007). Coaches can only uncover the client’s resources when they themselves are in a resourceful state and possess soft skills and specific personality traits, including, and above all, emotional intelligence. The role of this quality, which is conducive to building a successful and secure relationship with the client, has been clearly demonstrated by Stephen Neale (Neale et al., 2011).

The coaching relationship is a relationship that is aimed at enriching the lives of clients and helping them to uncover their resources. The coach takes on the role of a moderator in the client’s discussion with him/herself, and in this way, with the support of a coach, clients help themselves. The coaching relationship will be successful if both sides are committed to the process, but the underlying condition for this is the personality of the coach. In the case of the Socratic relationship, the weight is focused exclusively on Socrates, who is the guide and master emanating wisdom, with energy flowing in one direction: from Socrates to his interlocutor.

QUESTIONS

Jenny Rogers, a leading executive coach, suggests that giving advice or assessment while questioning the client during the coaching process should be avoided so as not to become involved in forcing change upon the client. It is the client who must engage in the process of reaching a solution, the client must be “the source of solutions” (Rogers, 2016). Questions should be short, substantial, neutral i.e., not leading questions, and powerful, i.e., relating to the sphere of values, e.g. Why is that important for you? What are you aiming at? What are you going to gain? What would it make you like? The sphere of values, unlike the sphere of convictions, is the natural and appropriate coaching sphere, for values unite people whereas convictions divide them.

Correctly posed, a question possesses great power – the client’s thought follows on from the question, for the direction of thought is already contained within the question. The questions posed by the coach should be constructed in such a way as to draw upon and strengthen the client’s present and potential resources. Coaching questions based on methods such as Dilts Pyramid are directed towards the future, resourcefulness, and above all, towards bringing about a change in any negative and destructive convictions about the self.

Although, like the coach, Socrates bases his questions on the interlocutor’s resources, the structure of his questions is a little different. Socrates draws out the knowledge that is already possessed, but unlike the coach, he is personally involved in getting his interlocutor to reach a particular solution (the truth). Socrates seems to know the answers to the questions he asks; he asks them in such a way that his student will come up with these very answers, though he does this in a very subtle manner, without giving offense. Socrates’ attitude is not just that of a coach but also of a counselor: “[...] and while I live and am able to continue, I shall never

give up philosophy or stop exhorting you and pointing out the truth [...] – most excellent man, are you [...] not ashamed to care for the acquisition of wealth, and for reputation and honor, when you neither care nor take thought for wisdom and truth and the perfection of your soul?” (*Apology*, 29d–e). In the dialogue Socrates always takes a leading role, whereas in coaching the client takes first place and is considered to be self-reliant. Despite these differences, in both approaches the interlocutors are treated with respect; they are valued and there is a sincere desire to help them.

GOALS

As in the case of Socratic practices, coaching can be distinguished from normal conversation in that during the process a goal must be identified. The coach’s task is to draw out and name the goal, rather than focusing on the problem. The problem is always translated into a goal that is positive, concrete, and achievable, and this goal is always connected with inner transformation, for example, a readiness to change some aspect of life.

When faulty thinking is revealed in the process of establishing goals, neither Socrates nor the coach states outright that a mistake has been made but rather allows the interlocutor to come to such conclusions independently. Socrates does this more in the style of a counselor or teacher whereas the coach takes the role of a traveling companion on the coachee’s journey into the self. The positioning of the interlocutors is also somewhat different. Whereas the coachee must want to change and must be fully engaged in the process, Socrates’ interlocutor, whether he wants to or not, is brought to the truth thanks to his master’s talents.

Socrates seems to be fully conversant with correct deduction and sets out to prove that although his interlocutor thinks he knows, in fact, he knows nothing: “then I tried to show him that he thought he was wise, but was not” (*Apology*, 21c–d). The coach, on the other hand, does not know what is best for his client, for he is guided by the principle that the client has a better understanding of what is best for him and only needs help in uncovering it.

In coaching, at least two types of goals are distinguished: transactional and transformational. The first type is concerned with achieving something, resolving a particular issue, whereas the second involves ‘intrinsic satisfaction’ and the art of coping with difficult situations (Rogers, 2016). Transformational goals can be compared to the practice of *futurorum malorum praemeditatio* (Lat.), which was to reach its zenith in Roman Stoicism, although elements of this practice can already be seen in Socrates. This spiritual exercise served to get to know or establish the self, to equip oneself with *paraskeue* (Gk.) or preparations, to make oneself resistant to the twists of fate and develop *andreia* (Gk.) or courage. The practice is also an expression of the philosophical asceticism, in other words, “training the self in order, among other things, never to be weaker than that which might betide us” (Foucault, 2005). Socrates provides an example of this when he advises the judges to equip themselves for death: “But you also, judges, must regard death hopefully and must bear in mind this one truth, that no evil can come to a good man either in life or after death, and God does not neglect him” (*Apology*, 41c–d).

The achievement of one’s goal, and the inner transformation involved in this, leads to a feeling of happiness. Happiness, for Socrates, was identified with the achievement of knowledge, or virtue, which leads, as a result, to good conduct (this is the so-called theory of ethical intellectualism). Coaches, in turn, often define happiness as harmony and balance among different spheres of life – the physical, emotional, intentional, and spiritual (Atkinson and Chois, 2007). Although the definitions place the emphasis on different aspects, the key issue is nevertheless the same in both cases, namely good conduct that is in keeping with one’s inner convictions (achieved by means of the Socratic process and coaching).

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT – CHANGE

Change in human life is unavoidable. As William James stated, a human can alter their life by altering their attitude. The idea of the inevitability of change stems from the nature of human thought and its consciousness.

Those experiencing the process of coaching or the encounter with Socrates undergo a gradual transformation, as a result of which they become equipped with skills for the art of living (Gk. *techné tou biou*). The effort exerted by the coach or Socrates in ‘preparing’ their subjects has far-reaching, philosophical consequences. According to many ancient philosophers, life is a test for which we should be prepared. The subjects become free and know that they must work on their own attitude towards themselves and the world, that is, they must concentrate on the things that they can influence – their emotions, decisions, and attitudes, while accepting the things that they have no influence over, that is, external events. They start to become aware of the need for, but also the benefits to be gained from, taking responsibility for their own lives. At first glance, it would appear that the Socratic method borders on metaphysics while the coaching method seems to be more pragmatic and individualistic; on closer inspection, however, it can be seen that the coaching method also encroaches on the very core of the subject’s being and changes it. There is no question, in either case, of any kind of manipulation or rhetoric, let alone magic, esoteric or mystery; it is purely about human wisdom: “The fact is, men of Athens, that I have acquired this reputation on account of nothing else than a sort of wisdom. What kind of wisdom is this? Just that which is perhaps human wisdom. For perhaps I really am wise in this wisdom” (*Apology*, 20d). The changes which take place in subjects as a result of coaching or the Socratic method are not restricted to the subjects alone, but also affect their environment and therefore society as a whole. The impact of coaching is manifested in change.

CONCLUSIONS

Although coaching associations like IFC or EMCC do not mention any underlying historical philosophical doctrine, a certain philosophy is, in fact, present in coaching, and a specific “practical philosophy of life”, that is ethics, can be clearly identified. The main thesis of this

philosophy is the idea that both one's own resources and those of others, care of the self and care of others can be understood in a very broad sense. While it is true that both Socrates and the coach work on their subjects' current resources, they also notice and draw out potential resources, for the possibility of change is also a resource. They help their interlocutors in the search for "the entire conduct of life that for each of us would make living most worthwhile" (*Republic*, 344e). Being resourceful means having control over the self, or command of the self. The coaching mindset is deeply humanistic, personalistic, and filled with respect for human beings and their potential. Coaching acknowledges the self-reliance, independence, and wisdom of each subject. In this respect the humanism of coaching surpasses that of Socrates, who reserved the right to lecture people on how to live, to judge others and their lives, to point out deficiencies in their consciences and speak out when he noticed that they were not working on improving themselves (*Apology*, 30a–b). What is more, in the discussions of Socrates, we can observe that he distinguishes between those who are better and worse: "But I do know that it is evil and disgraceful to do wrong and to disobey him who is better than I, whether he be god or man" (*Apology*, 29b) and also "for I believe it is not God's will that a better man be injured by a worse" (*Apology*, 30d). The coach does not make such distinctions, yet she/he avoids from falling into a moral relativism like the Sophists. Coaching abides by a moral code which distinguishes between right and wrong.

The concept of the goal in coaching is also worth highlighting. This goal should be positive, concrete, and determined by the individual. It is the third characteristic in particular that is of importance from the viewpoint of philosophy. According to ancient wisdom, especially the Roman philosophy of life expressed by Stoicism and Epicureanism, all unhappiness arises from setting unrealistic goals. An unrealistic goal is a goal which, by the very nature of things, cannot be achieved because it is not contingent on our own decisions. According to Pierre Hadot, "The task of philosophy, is to educate people, so that they seek only the goods they are able to obtain, and try to avoid only those evils which it is possible to avoid" (Hadot, 1995). Ancient philosophy fostered the pursuit of goals that lay within the sphere of one's liberty while all else should be left to the nature of things. Philosophy then (mainly Stoicism) in its original sense, following Hadot, is not a theoretical construct but "a method for training people to live and to look at the world in a new way" (Hadot, 1995). This is reminiscent of the coaching mindset. Both of these forms are non-invasive, yet the effects produced by their practices, including, above all, self-awareness and "concentration on the present moment" (Hadot, 1995) are very powerful.

To sum up, coaching is primarily a form of educational and developmental support focused on bringing about a change in thinking strategies. Although practical in character, it is possible to point to its theoretical underpinnings, even though these are not directly expressed, for coaching does not possess source texts per se that represent its foundation base. Some schools of coaching recognize the works of Milton Erikson, Carl Rogers, or Robert Dilts as such foundation sources, but neither ICF nor EMCC emphasize these texts. I believe that the term "resourceful coach" discussed above, as well as the values promoted in coaching (such as high ethical standards, respect, an inclusive concept of human beings and their self-reliance) clearly demonstrate that coaching has its roots in philosophy. Studying philosophy may therefore contribute to finding deeper layers of meaning in the pursuit of coaching.

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