

# Critical Realist Coaching: An Epistemological Lens into Client Profiling

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## Abstract

The rationale for this paper arose from over a decade of Irish field research investigating coachee's pathways to reemployment. It became apparent that the same complex social issues, differing degrees of openness and disclosure, and the emergent and partial client details that faced mixed method research were also present in the coaching dyad trying to elevate the client's employment status. As a response to this dilemma, the emerging paradigm of Critical Realism (CR) was adopted to unite multiple psychological / coaching approaches into a single epistemological framework during client work. CR proposes the critical evaluation of *empirical data* as the starting point for understanding the client's sense of ontology. This level is followed by the socially constructed realm of *the actual* where a mutual, but limited understanding of the client's reality is generated via shared meaning making. This important issue reminds the coach that we view the client through our own perceptual filter (which is not independently objective). The highest realm of reality is *the real* which uses various forms of abductive and retro-ductive analysis to help identify the generative mechanisms and causal forces that manifest into the influences upon the coachees behaviour the interpretation of life events. Critical realism is as much a mind set of the coach as it is a hierarchical process of working with complex clients of which unemployment is just one example. However, critical realism is arguably more comprehensive and integrative than selecting a singular coaching perspective. However, it is conceded that more research and investigation is needed to refine the approach and its precise role and application in the coaching process.

**Key words:** Epistemology, 2) Ontology in Coaching, 3) Critical Realism, 4) Client Profiling, 5) Integrative Coaching

## INTRODUCTION

The context in which coaching occurs can sometimes be as complex as the client themselves (if the two are indeed separable). This multifaceted dynamic is particularly apparent when working with the unemployed. To extract and evaluate the needs of the client is one of the most fundamental tasks of coaching, yet rarely is any client a comprehensive open book with an easy to find life event index attached. Furthermore, the coach themselves could possibly benefit from a reliable ontological structure to build a cognitive understanding of the clients emerging world. Therefore, an organising framework than can assist the

coach in piecing together this array of data is worthy of consideration. This was the rationale adopted in field research when it transpired that even contemporary and applied paradigms like pragmatism could not adequately account for intricate social events like unemployment and the uneven pathway to reemployment. Pertinent to this issue, Biesta (2010) adds that the ultimate flaw and instability of pragmatism is its lack of an adequate epistemological foundation. It later transpired that the practice of coaching in complex social situations was also subject to the same issues as field research. Namely, there was not one single approach or paradigm that

could adequately account for the wide range of behaviours and client interactions being experienced which encourages an integrated or eclectic approach. According to Clark (2008) Critical Realism is particularly effective as an epistemological foundation for exploring complex social issues in their natural state. Therefore, even if an eclectic approach to coaching method selection is adopted as advocated by Hardingham (2021), the epistemological foundation of Critical Realism can help provide a stable footing for the coach. Uniting different forms of data and multiple levels of analysis collated from different coaching techniques into one organising framework could provide various benefits. It is not suggested here that this scenario applies in all coaching contexts. It is though a regular feature in complex social contexts like reemployment where there could be several hidden and conflicting issues that may result in client resistance, staggered and fragmented disclosure, contradictory behaviour, and flawed or distorted subjective competency / self efficacy within the client's own sense of self. The aim then of this paper is to introduce the emerging paradigm of Critical Realism, and discuss its application into coaching practice.

### **THE REAL-WORLD PHILOSOPHY OF CRITICAL REALISM**

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Much attributed to the work of the British Philosopher, Roy Bhaskar, and traditionally referred to as '*dialectical critical realism*', Critical Realism (CR) arose in the mid 1970's as a theory that described the nature of social reality (Bhaskar and Lawson, 1998). According to Hamlin (2000), the theories of Bhaskar combine three elements, ontological realism (that there is something real out there), epistemological relativism (that there is more than one type of knowledge), and judgemental rationality (there is criteria by which to evaluate explanations). The focal element of Critical Realism is that reality must be grounded in something real (but continues to exist whether you comprehensively know what it is or not, or whether you can measure it or not). However, human knowledge is not confined to the physical world and traditional sciences. Critical realists make a distinction between physical reality (present in the material world), and social reality (socially constructed knowledge), and as a result they suggest there may be more than one type of epistemology (and in coaching then, more than one way of analysing and assisting the client). Critical realism argues that the causal forces of reality are rarely found within individuals, who are more so responsive to often unseen forces and environmental conditions. This possibly places some

restrictions upon the loci of control (Rotter, 1966), which may have interesting implications for empowerment and goal setting in coaching practice. The central feature of critical realism is that the world is not always 'objectively' knowable via reductionism, empirical research, and investigation, but nevertheless is always there. Critical Realists argue that traditional knowledge and positivist epistemology tend only to focus on what is immediately knowable through the senses and our experience, but not necessarily identifying or even recognising the underlying structures and mechanisms that make that knowledge possible. This point is significant in the field of coaching for it represents the presence of hidden issues in the clients lives akin to an invisible black hole distorting the observed orbital trajectory of a planet. In essence, it permits the coach to hypothesise beyond the data if the logic fits the evidence. Recognising this hidden element, Mingers, Mutch, and Willcocks (2013, p. 796) argue then that, "we should not reduce all events to only those that are observed, and we should not reduce enduring causal mechanisms to events". Namely, we should be cautiously reminded that we only ever see part of the ontological picture and remain mindful that there are more pieces to the client's jigsaw. In short, Critical Realism reduces the sole emphasis upon empiricism, and reconsiders the status of social constructionism and phenomenological introspection in the task of generating a shared understanding between the coach and coachee.

One of the most significant coaching considerations realised by Critical Realism is the concept of 'double hermeneutics' (originally discussed by Giddens, 1984). In this context, this concept would suggest that the meaning created between the coach and the coachee is a mutual co-construction. It is through the coaches own mind and experience that they formulate a combined and mutual understanding of the client. This effectively rejects the independent objectivity of the coach but recognises their value and place as an active contributor to the shared meaning generated. The coach often brings a wealth of professional experience, subject matter knowledge, and reflection to the analysis of the client's story. This insight can be essential for theory building and pattern recognition beyond the client's data alone inevitably evoking a degree of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA, after Smith and Fieldsend, 2021).

### **A CRITICAL REALISTS VIEW OF WHAT EXISTS IN THE CLIENTS WORLD**

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To elaborate upon the Critical Realist model of ontology, Bhaskar & Lawson (1998, p.5) make the important, "distinction between

the domain of the real, the actual, and the empirical". A three-level hierarchy describing the contents and features of existence and it is suggested that coaches might benefit from using such a model. All forms of coaching generate knowledge and data. Depending on the type of coaching method / technique selected, different types of knowledge can be collated. That knowledge can be placed on a spectrum between highly empirical, rising to highly abstract / symbolic, and beyond to what is still unknown. It is encouraged that the coach commences their investigations to understand and profile the client with empirical data, and then progress to higher forms of knowledge (See Table 1) in order to finally identify and propose the causal and regulatory forces operating in the clients thinking and behaviour.

The 'empirical' physical world is what can be accessed by our direct experience and is open to observation and measurement (e.g. inventories and psychometric tests etc.). However, measurements and observations are also fallible, partial, and may be affected by the human processes of perception and 'top down' attribution (we see what we think we see, respond with what we think is expected of us, or respond with the impression we want others to see us by). Translating this principle into the coaching context, this poignantly reminds the coach that any tests, inventories, and other empirical data collected on a client are merely descriptive, relatively transient, and possibly biased. They are therefore regarded as informative and indicative, but (importantly) should not be construed as causal in the client's motivation or behaviour. This is alternative position from the traditional application of psychometric tests which often places considerable validity on the use of such tools, and frequently claim the traits and dispositions revealed are predictive of future behaviour. This may be a fair proposition in some cases, but not all, especially in conflicted situations like unemployment. This is not to suggest Critical Realism rejects the use of such tests; indeed they provide an important array of data to help understand and profile the client. However, CR cautions against over generalisation and making or attributing causal arguments based on empirical data alone. To apply an analogy, in critical realism empirical data only represents the tip of the iceberg. Although indicative that there is something more, the visible part of the material or social world does not always portray an accurate representation of precisely what lies beneath the waterline. As Pilgrim (2020) writes, "If we stay on the surface, we will only ever achieve a superficial account", (p. 166). This issue is especially relevant to unemployed job seekers who are frequently amnesic

or overly modest regarding their own competencies. The issue of tacit knowledge is a concern in coaching as well as organisational contexts. Cohen and Bacdayan (1994) reported, "they simply cannot put into words what they do and why", (p. 556), which immediately places doubt regarding the comprehensiveness and utility of empirical data alone.

Beyond the material world of the empirical, the realm of the 'actual' includes our momentary experience, consciousness, social experiences, but it also includes the 'bits we miss' that aren't captured by our limited observation, limited cognitive processing, or underdetermined empirical measurements (where there could be more than one interpretation). The actual world also includes events and actions that may be passive, subtle, or may not even be observable at all. Errors can also occur in that the way the actual world is perceived, the framed or partial way it appears to us, and/or the way it is attributed. It should be noted that Critical Realists reject the epistemological anarchy of pure relativism, instead arguing that all reality must have an empirical basis somewhere or somehow (we just might not know it, or be able to measure it precisely or its entirety). That said, aspects of reality also reflect *temporal emergence*, the notion that not all aspects of an entity may be observable at any one time and their presence (when they do appear) will vary according to other hidden variables (Elder-Vass, 2007). Entities and observances in the empirical world can also change shape or form according to the unseen forces acting upon them. In terms of coaching, this limited empirical presence encourages a critical and limited form of introspection and/or social constructivism to fill the gaps. Although limited in terms of what is interpreted should still be grounded in, or linked to empirical evidence, or has the potential to be so. This means the clients worldview may subtly shift, grow, adapt, and morph; presenting to the coach a relatively changing collage of the client and their perceived world. It must also be born in mind then that we are perceiving the client and making sense of them through our own perceptual and phenomenological lens (the double hermeneutic principle). Mearns (2011) sums this up, "Critical realism therefore, acknowledges that there is an objective, mind independent reality while at the same time accepting the role of perception and cognition in the understanding of events, situations etc."(p.363). Beyond attending to what Schön (1983) would refer to as our 'theories in use', perceiving the actual world prompts the coach to realise we are in the act of transference (Freud and Breuer, 1895) when we engage with clients (hence the synthesis with IPA). Admittedly, it takes years of reflective

learning, self analysis, and careful attending during client consultations before we as coaches start to get some glimpses of the glass filters we ourselves look through when we observe the client. Such reflective exercises may also be valid material for discussion during supervision.

At the highest level of reality, Critical Realists argue that the 'real' is the unseen or underlying generative mechanisms, structures and processes that lie behind the events they generate and the experiences we perceive (namely, the real drivers of human behaviour and cognition). These, Bhaskar & Lawson (1998) refer to as 'intransitive objects', objects and mechanisms that exist but are not necessarily dependent upon our knowledge or perception of them. The emergent aspect of reality then is not just a case of gradual discovery. Critical Realists hold, "a view therefore that objects have emergent properties which interact with each other and as a result new properties are created or emerge from old combinations of objects" (Scott, 2007, p. 9). As such, the causal forces that lie behind perceived reality can be fluid and dynamic. To the work of the coach, this suggests that the world of the client is the product of a 'causal soup', where the coach is left to deduce the ingredients of the broth in order to suggest possible changes.

This ontological soup contains morphogenic causes (factors that help create the existence of an entity or change the nature of an existing entity), and morphostatic causes (factors that help sustain the existence of an entity over a period of time). Arguably, one could be forgiven if Bhaskar's vision of the real resonates with Freud's notion of the Id. Both are hidden, mysterious, but are the primary drivers of what would eventually transpire as cognition and behaviour. However, in the final analysis, the coach must concede that their perception of the client and their epistemological world is a co-construction, a shared understanding, a product of phenomenology and empirical entities that have passed through a number of seen, suspected, and invisible filters. However, an appealing viewpoint and consideration for coaches is that,

"external casual regularities exist and that individual behaviour in everyday life is determined by how people make sense of them and react to them. Knowledge is gained from an independent reality which is accessed by individuals through their ability to reflect and learn from experience".

*(Mearns, 2011, p. 364).*

It is the distance between empirical reality (what can be directly observed and measured) and the hidden causal mechanisms that generate those events is the reason why Critical Realists have issue with proclaiming causality from empirical data alone. To elaborate, the effects a coach observes in their client's behaviour may not always illuminate the cause. Critical realists take a wider perspective where they claim the focus should not be that A causes B, but about realising and reflecting upon the process and conditions under which A might lead to B,

"while the empiricist is concerned with whether correlated empirical phenomena are causally linked (internal validity), a critical realist will be looking to establish whether the generative mechanism hypothesised or uncovered is involved in the observed events in the field",

*(Zachariasdis, Scott, and Barrett, 2013, p. 859).*

Coaches may recognise this issue in that the impression of the client that eventually transpires can be quantitative and qualitatively different from the initial data. From working with the unemployed, it was a frequent occurrence that their demographic data, CV's, career inventories, and psychometric tests etc. often presented incomplete and (if taken literally), sometimes misleading impressions of the client. Potentially there are several coaching contexts where clients suffer a loss of self efficacy and (possibly a variant of Alexithymia) where coachees have genuine difficulties in recognising, taking ownership, or labelling their own competencies. Such omissions present issues in gathering / recording empirical data. Even after a range of discourse and dialectical techniques have been deployed, there is still the sense something may be missing. Hence the final process in viewing the client's reality is through a range of reflective exercises. Applying the work of Wuisman (2005), the higher level reflective / analytical process of deduction helps identify the regularities that appear to link or bind themes in this case in the client's evidence / empirical data. Alternatively, Haig (2005, p.372-373) defines the use of abductive logic as, "reasoning from phenomena, understood as presumed effects, to their theoretical explanation in terms of underlying causal mechanisms" (as cited in Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2012, p.781). The process of abduction helps form explanatory hypotheses that explain the client's current behaviour and modes of cognition, while a further process, retro-deduction, identifies a number testable scenarios

to help establish if the abductive explanations were correct or plausible based on the original empirical data collated.

Critical realism does not suggest specific coaching techniques although in social research mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative) are the dominant recommendation (McEvoy & Richards, 2006). Coaching method selection should be based on the standard ethical criteria that they should be fit for purpose and meet the needs of the client at their level of comprehension and language. It is logical to suggest that the decision as to which methods of coaching we adopt will effectively influence the type and nature of the client questions we ask, the analytical procedures we deploy; and (inevitably) the solutions we discuss (Not to mention the client's perception and satisfaction of the coaching experience). The issue of method selection (and their respective effectiveness) is a debate with a long pedigree in the context of clinical psychotherapy. Wampold (2023) introduced the notion of the Dodo bird verdict in 1997, the summary of their empirical meta-analysis was that all therapeutic approaches have merit. The question of coaching methods evaluation regarding executive coaching was also asked by economists, Segers and Vloeberghs (2009). Their conclusion was that if all coaching methods have merit, focus on those which offer an empirical basis of analysis. It is not the task here to compare and evaluate coaching interventions by some empirical yard stick. To be clear, critical realism is not a new coaching technique par se. It is however a set of epistemological principles that help organise a hierarchy of perception and shared understanding of the client's world. It should be noted that what makes Critical Realism *critical*, is the stipulation that although realism accepts that things may exist that cannot be easily identified or measured, *critical* realism does not accept pure relativism where *anything* goes. One of the axioms of critical realism is that reality must have some basis in the empirical world. Rather like observing an iceberg having at least a tip above the waterline, with the caveat that those measurement / evaluations taken and analysed are regarded as indicative rather than deduced as factual, incremental, and/or causal (Danermark et al. 2002). So, although there are indicators of something else beneath the waterline (measures of performance / evaluation), the observable evidence is not over generalised, but is regarded instead as exploratory (an arguably useful position in coaching). This suggests (in relation to the Dodo verdict) that not all approaches to coaching have the same degree of merit in all circumstances, but similarly are not necessarily validated by just empirical criteria alone as if such measurements were

the only acceptable yard stick. Furthermore, in complex social contexts like unemployment and reemployment there are several stakeholders whom may calculate the results and effectiveness of coaching in quite different ways, to various standards, and recognise quite different outcomes. Therefore, the position of critical realists on coaching interventions is probably like that of a range of stakeholders; and to adapt the words of George Orwell in *Animal Farm* it is probably the case that, '*all coaching methods are equal, but some are more equal than others*'. This arguably relates to what Pilgrim (2020) refers to as "Magpie Eclecticism" (p. 164 ff.). Certainly though, one of the main beneficial appeals of Critical Realism in applied research is its ability to discuss appropriate mixed (coaching) method results with stakeholders who themselves may possess different epistemological positions (Zachariadis, Scott, and Barrett, 2013). That said, many coaches would agree that the needs of client should direct the precise coaching method(s) applied over the needs of empirical rigour and external evaluation. This however does not ignore the fact that in many cases the financial sponsor of the coaching intervention may have certain expectations regarding their investment and will look for a means to conduct a cost: benefit analysis. Arguably then, the adoption of critical realism presents an opportunity to adopt mixed methods, and, appease various stakeholders without falling into a conflict of being forced to adopt only '*empirically friendly*' forms of coaching (reminiscent of the *paradigm wars*, Williams, 2020). All critical realism prescribes this that the coach starts with methods that generate appropriate empirical data, then progresses to gather actual (socially constructed) data culminating in symbolic or phenomenological methods to allow causal hypotheses of the real domain to be identified and analysed (see Table 1).

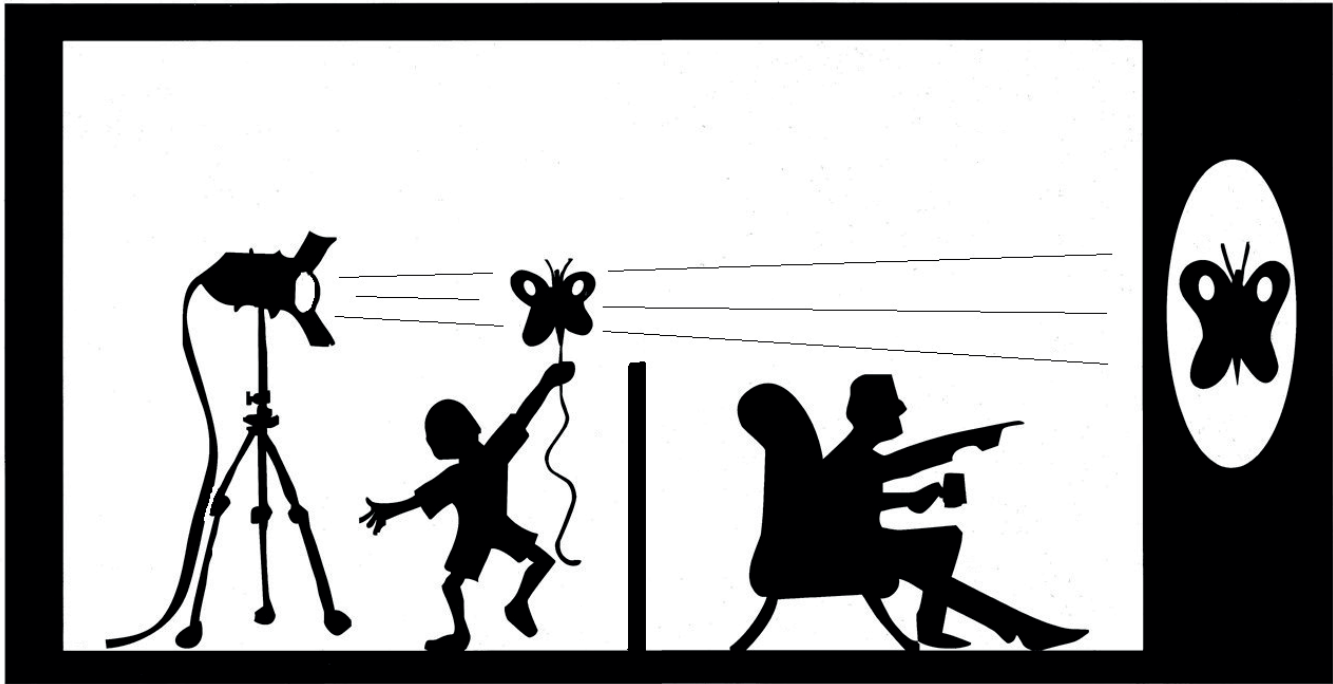
It is fair to argue that mixed methods in coaching have already been discussed in Passmore (2021) where an integrated approach to coaching was advocated (p. 322 ff.). Again, Passmore raises the methods selection issue in the Dodo verdict debate with the rational reply that specific populations may benefit from particular types of coaching intervention, and some clients may even have a self advocated preference. Where Critical Realism falls into this debate is that it offers the categorisation of different coaching methods that can be selected and integrated under a single epistemological framework (see Table 1) based on the particular type of knowledge / data that coaching method generates. This allows different coaching methods to be used sequentially over the process of coaching that under different

**Table 1:**  
*A proposed Categorisation of Coaching Methods into a Critical Realist Model of Epistemology*

CR Level of Ontology	Description (As depicted in Critical Realism).	Examples of Coaching Technique / Approach*
<b>Empirical</b> Physical ↓ Behavioural ↓	Human perspectives upon the material world, measurable events and actions are the end products of other less tangible forces. When regulatory patterns emerge, they may be indicative of other suspected or unknown forces that created them. Results at this level may lack explanatory power. The coaching emphasis here is on data collection, and producing measurable evidence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survey / Interest Inventories.</li> <li>• Personality Testing / Repertory Grid</li> <li>• Behaviourist / Behavioural Modification Methods.</li> <li>• Performance enhancement / goal setting forms of coaching.</li> <li>• Solution Focused / Brief Therapeutic Methods.</li> </ul>
<b>Actual</b> Intrapersonal / Cognitive ↓ Interpersonal ↓ Symbolic / Unconscious ↓	Events, patterns, and outcomes that occur in the perceptual world that are accessible to humans, but are not so easily or directly measured. These regularities are open to detection arising from a mass of material evidence, inference, logic, the deduction of narratives, opinions, and the analysis of shared social discourse. Originating in reality, but often socially constructed. In coaching, the methods rise from being explicitly cognitive, to more abstract / tacit and symbolically interactive in the type of data / knowledge they collate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CBT</li> <li>• Person-centred counselling.</li> <li>• REBT</li> <li>• Gestalt coaching.</li> <li>• Narrative / dialectical forms of coaching &amp; discourse analysis.</li> <li>• Interpretative phenomenological analysis.</li> <li>• Psychodynamic Methods.</li> </ul>
<b>Real</b> Causal	The intangible underlying or indirect / discreet relations, structures, and regularities that influence events in the client's life and their direction in the actual world (either as singular forces, or arbitrarily combined events). In effect, the driving forces behind perceived reality and human behaviour.  The real is only accessed by higher levels of analysis after careful reflection upon actual events, and their corresponding empirical evidence. Abductive or meta-inferences are then created and tested by retro-duction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abduction – To translate the client's experience / data into a conceptual framework created by the observed regularities within the client's data / experience in order to propose possible causes and motives.</li> <li>• Retro-duction – To propose motives, causality, and pattern regularities. To test with the client if the hypothesis retrospectively fits the events in the client's life.</li> </ul>

\*Please note, the order and coaching methods contained in this table are at present proposed as hypothetical.

**Figure 1:**  
Hannah's Cave



Hannah's Cave\*, diagram courtesy of Bryan Art and Design, Dublin.

*\*Upon describing the events in Plato's Cave as a design brief for the drawing, the artist later reported he was inspired by the memory of his late daughter whom he saw a driver in his own perception, a feeling she was somehow still there making a difference and influencing the way he saw things. It seemed like a good understanding of the concept and an example of critical realist ideology; hence I gave the diagram the title of 'Hannah's Cave'.*

circumstances may have been regarded as incompatible or even conflicting. Like many complex open systems (Robson, 2002, Næss, 2008), unemployment coaching is influenced by numerous stakeholders with surprisingly varied goals (e.g., in the case of unemployment *any job will do*, over, *the best job for you*. Similarly, *adequate performance*, over, *optimal performance*, or *reduce stress*, over, *increase resilience* etc.). As such, Critical Realism holds the potential to facilitate the integration of coaching methods without conflict or contradiction of ideology.

As demonstrated in Table 1, and similar to aspects of Passmore's Streams (2021, *ibid.*), Critical Realism's description of ontology could be broken down into physical / behavioural, conscious (intrapersonal and interpersonal), and rising to symbolic forms of knowledge. However, it should be noted that the precise terminology and sequencing of different types of

knowledge generated by equivalent methods of coaching is an area still open to future research and debate. Yet, supporting the conclusions of Passmore (2021), a mixed method / integrated approach to coaching holds a rich potential. Place this approach within one epistemological framework and a lot of conflicting methodological and stakeholder issues could be potentially reduced.

## REFLECTIONS

Placing these three levels of ontology in sequence, the Critical Realist vision of reality can be analogically compared to Plato's Shadows on the Cave where we (the passive observer) can only see in the empirical domain of the shadows flickering on the wall (see Figure 1, above), the effects of hidden causes.

That said, the shadows on the wall are the 'hard data' and effectively represent reflections of the actual internal mechanisms operating on the client's world and the terminal end-product of effects (but *not* necessarily the cause(s) itself). This notion is well versed in philosophy where, "what experience delivers is always a product not only of the world, but also of (contingent) features of our own constitution" (Price & McDowell, 1997, p. 172). Namely, you are only ever looking at the results, not the causes of the client's thoughts, cognition, and behaviour that have brought them to the coaching session seen through (and not forgetting) your own perceptual lens. We must also recognise the remainder of darkened wall itself (while all our attention was on the flickering shadow of the butterfly) represents the wider metaphysical reality which extends beyond our immediate senses and continues to exist even though we may not be aware of its presence (it also potentially relates to unknown factors that were not measured or reported upon). Psychologically, the Empirical Domain is where our sensation of the world meets our perception to be partially processed considering our previous experience and the focus of our immediate and momentary attention. It captures our interaction with the client in a specific time and place.

The Actual Domain of Critical Realism is a product of a shared mind (between the coach and coachee) and is represented in Plato's analogy as the unseen object that creates the shadows (in this example, the child's butterfly kite). Some of the features of the actual domain are inferred by the results visible in the empirical domain, but they are not directly observable themselves and not so easily measured, yet are confidently believed to exist as inferred from the ability to see the shadow on the wall. Part of what is considered actual is (in reality) the product of social forces, a semi-rigid creation of socially constructed metaphysics (hence the child baring influence upon the action of the butterfly). The Actual Domain reflects the experience and perception of physical reality through social discourse that transcends beyond what is, or can be directly measured. The Actual is a synthesis between the physical and perceptual reality, it's represents the world '*as we see it*' and what we believe it to be. At the higher end of the Actual Domain, through Phenomenological or Psychoanalysis, the hidden elements of what is considered to drive or influence what actually exists in the client's life may be partially speculated upon. At this point, the coach projects beyond the data using analytical tools to examine aspects of the Real Domain of the client's life and functioning.

Much of coaching could be argued to represent discussions concerning the *Real*. The Real Domain, like Freud's Id remains elusive, only partially observed in reflection, but is the primary driver of what later appears as reality, rational cognition, and behaviour. The Real Domain is symbolized by the stage lamp in Plato's cave (see Figure 1), the original light source behind the objects that create the shadows we eventually see on the wall of the cave. The Real governs what features of our dynamic reality are causally revealed / created at any one point in time, how and when they are revealed, what parts (or how much) of an entity are revealed, and for how long they appear to exist. However, these forces of nature or the psyche cannot be confirmed until verified by higher levels of analysis in the form of Abduction and/or verified through Retro-duction. Again, this notion is not unfamiliar in philosophy where Koons (2004) reports;

"The world cannot by itself tell us how it is. Our cooperation is required: only in the context of an inferential superstructure containing a metalanguage of normative propriety can these causal inputs acquire epistemic significance'.

*Koons (2004, p.148).*

If retro-duction is successful, then this facilitates the generation of meta-inferences, and summarises predictive statements about the nature and structure of reality for the world of the client. In this stage, the coach may perceive the elements of epistemology that come together to create a profile of the client's reality.

## SUMMARY

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The application of critical realism as a framework for coaching and understanding the profile of the client's story should be supported by further research, and this suggestion is encouraged. Some may argue that issues like client ontology and epistemology of the coaching dyad should be left to armchair philosophers. However, castles built in marshes often sink or topple, and so it is argued that coaching interventions should be built upon solid epistemological foundations to avoid potential collapse. Similarly, like a mechanic understanding the basic principles of engineering, the coach should have an understanding of the basic principles and dynamics of ontology. Awareness of the forces acting upon the causality of events are intriguing food for thought in the coach: coachee



dyad. For the coach, epistemological approaches like critical realism offer an enriched level of insight and analysis arguably resulting in more comprehensive and insightful needs focussed client solution. Adoption of a critical realist paradigm may also inspire avenues for continuous professional development and training. However, more importantly, the realisation that the coach's analysis and deduction are instead firmly rooted in the construct of reality helps produce palpable level of confidence and assurance in the coaching solutions being discussed. Although formulated in the applied context of reemployment / unemployment coaching, the application of Critical Realism as an organising structure for client profiling could be considered in many other complex open systems where coaching is applied. ■

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